WALK IT LIKE I TALK IT: RACE, LANGUAGE, AND PERFORMANCE IN BATTLE RAP

Jordan M. Davis

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Approved by:

Glenn Hinson

Karla Slocum

Charles Price

ABSTRACT

Jordan M. Davis:
WALK IT LIKE I TALK IT: RACE, LANGUAGE, AND PERFORMANCE IN BATTLE RAP
(Under the direction of Glenn Hinson)

Contemporary battle rap is subgenre of rap that has risen to prominence over the last decade. This thesis will explore the ways in which battle rap participants—fans, rappers, and battle league administrators—collectively contribute to a black space in which complex, multifaceted ideas of blackness can simultaneously exist. Chapter 1 opens with an autobiographical example and places battle rap in conversation with older traditions of black oral performance. Chapter 2 narratively and theoretically explores moments in the line outside of a battle rap event, where fans and battlers congregate and take space in anticipation of the event to come. Chapter 3 continues the narrative, moving into the building and beginning to look at ways in which battle rappers construct multifarious notions of blackness through their lyrics onstage. Finally, Chapter 4 moves away from narrative and looks thematically at how battlers lyrically construct ideas about blackness more broadly.

To my late grandparents Edward and Judy Custenborder. Without your dedication, love, and commitment, I would not be where I am today.

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PREFACE

I've loved battle rap since my early years of high school. For this project, I wanted to encapsulate a number of important facets of the battle rap experience—not least of which is the experience of being black in a black space,[1] the notion that battle rappers are engaged in knowledge production and the often complicated, sticky realities of doing so in a highly competitive space. The format of this paper was inspired by a class in my graduate coursework taught by Dr. Renee Alexander Craft that focused on performance studies and performance ethnography as a way of researching, writing, and presenting information. Additionally, my own advisor Glenn Hinson's book, *Fire in my Bones,* further informed the idea's enactment. My idea was that the best way to encapsulate the battle rap experience in writing was to take my reader on a narrative journey of attending a battle rap event, making stops along the way to situate my narrative theoretically and to provide lyrical examples of my overall argument about blackness, black space, and knowledge production. To distill the immense wealth of lyrical information contained in the hundreds of battles on YouTube, I chose to focus primarily on one battle from the event that I attended. I draw from other battles as well, but the narrative, as well as the discourse analysis, focuses on this battle.

[1]I recognize that the term "black space" is abstract and hence open to competing interpretations; however, I use black space to mean a space in which blackness is the central social category—quantitatively and qualitatively. By framing it as such, I hope to underline the complexities of blackness and its construction in these spaces, working against a simple categorization and instead conceptualizing black space as a site of what John L. Jackson (2001) calls "antiessentialist possibilities" for understanding race—one that includes the infinitely complex ways in which individuals live racial identities.

I also found it apt to begin with an autobiographical example. My description of the Connecticut-based emcee QB vs Bronx-based Ms. Fit battle highlights how I experienced battle rap for seven-odd years from 2012-2019. That is to say, for seven years, I (along with many other fans) experienced battle rap entirely online. It wasn't until I attended my first event in-person in May 2019—Queen of the Ring's "Panic Room 4" card—that I realized the importance of embodied experience as distinct from online experience in watching battle rap, particularly as a black person myself.

With this thesis I hope to open new conversations about race in the academy—particularly as it relates to battle rap—as well as to open space for these two powerful forums for knowledge production to enter into conversation with *one another*. Battle rap today is an understudied-yet-critically-important piece of contemporary Hip Hop Culture that warrants rigorous and respectful academic inquiry.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

I grew up a biracial kid in Topeka, Kansas. For the first nine years of my schooling I attended Catholic school. My class was always small—21 or 22 people was the largest it ever became—and for the most part the constituency remained the same throughout my attendance. A core group of kids growing up together, with a small number entering and exiting the class over the years. These were kids I laughed with, learned with, played with, and became with, from kindergarten through our eighth-grade commencement. It's clear looking back that we were our own community; but as I became myself alongside the rest of these kids, I came to realize that my becoming included an additional layer of complexity. For the vast majority of my childhood, I was the only black child in my peer group. Early on this fact eluded me, but as I progressed through elementary and middle school and continued to be socialized inside and outside of school, the differences became pronounced in ever-higher relief.

It was difficult for me to come to terms with what growing up as a biracial kid meant alongside being raised Catholic, and for most of my youth I didn't think through the issue. I went to church twice a week and I prayed, but at the same time I was a big fan of R&B and Rap—particularly the southern brand of Crunk that was popular when I was growing up, artists like Lil' John, Petey Pablo, Ludacris, Ciara, and Crime Mob. Granted, I usually listened to these songs on the radio with omitted curse words, but Hip Hop Culture was still important in the formative years of my life. These two facets of my being were thrust into conflict with one another in one particularly troubling instance. In the 5th grade, I was called a nigger by an older white student, an event that further dislodged my sense of community within a school system

that never felt welcoming to people who looked like me. After eighth grade I decided I'd had enough of the insularity of Catholic school and decided to go to public high school. The differences were stark.

I went from having a class of 21 in a school with a few hundred students to having a class of over 400 in a school with a student body of over 1700. Opportunities abounded, with a diverse array of student organizations and clubs to choose from. Classes spanned the breadth of disciplinary inquiry—from social and behavioral sciences to natural science, mathematics, foreign language, music, and art. The number of opportunities was truly alien to me. Additionally, there was also a broad suite of AP and IB courses so that if I chose that path, I could push myself to entirely new fields of exploration. This high school was diverse in ways I had never encountered before, diverse in almost every way except one.

Despite the staggering size of the student body, my high school was predominantly white; even as recently as the 2018-2019 academic year, the school was over 85% white.[2] Amidst this majority white existence, however, Hip Hop allowed me to connect to another aspect of my life as a biracial man. Throughout my childhood, Hip Hop Culture felt like a home away from what I experienced in the everyday. It was simultaneously different from and familiar to my own life. Despite my geographical distance from the major centers of Hip Hop Culture like New York City, Los Angeles, and Atlanta, radio and television offered an opening into a world dominated by people who looked like me—various shades of black and brown. The ways in which popular black Hip Hop artists of the late 90s and 2000s styled themselves, and the music they produced, resonated with something in me. It provided me an imaginary of an alternative way of existence—one in which blackness didn't merely feel like a minority category as it did in my

[2]Auburn-Washburn Unified School District 437, *Demographic Data 2018-2019,* "Ethnicity", 7.

daily life, but was in fact what others attempted to emulate, something to be revered. Indeed, in the same way as Hip Hop as a whole simultaneously establishes global trends in music, fashion, and dance, while also allowing itself to be expressed locally in congruence with specific struggles and representations, so too did it operate in my personal life as an imaginary of a different kind of group belonging amidst a white-dominated existence.[3] This was the context in which I found myself in the spring of 2012—then a high school sophomore taking a sociology class to fulfill a core social science requirement—when my academic life as high schooler came into contact with this love for Hip Hop, leading me to discover a form of Hip Hop expression that was entirely unfamiliar to me at the time—battle rap.

It was one morning sitting in that sociology classroom. The room itself was a rather typical high school classroom—whiteboard spanning the front of the windowless room with neutral walls and smooth beige, synthetic-material desks. We spent most days learning about the fundamentals of sociology, but this day we had a free day to work on our final paper. In the midst of a mental rut, I made the executive decision to take a work break and logged onto worldstarhiphop.com. *Worldstarhiphop* is a popular Hip Hop cultural media outlet that uploads photos, videos, and news stories.

After scrolling around Worldstar for a few minutes, I came across a video titled "QB vs Ms. Fit Rap Battle [Female Battle][Grind Time Now East]." The thumbnail of the video showed a bust-height still image of QB, a black woman then in her late teens or early 20s, standing in a commanding pose in the middle of a verbal expression. Behind her were three or four other individuals and a solid white background illuminated indirectly by some sort of stage or camera lighting. My attention was immediately captured. Even before I watched the video, the word

[3]For more about this idea, see *glocalization*; Spady, Alim, & Meghelli, *The Global Cipha: Hip Hop Culture and Consciousness* (Philadelphia, PA: Black History Museum Press, 2006).

"Battle"—included twice in the title and the thumbnail—evoked the intensity of that moment, and hinted at the exciting, impassioned performance that was only a click away.

The opening moments of the video began with a graphic of the Grind Time Now battle league logo with the proclamation "The Worlds [sic] Largest Hip Hop Battle League." This was backed by a catchy piano- and percussion-driven beat that to this day brings me back to this first time watching a rap battle. The video faded from the opening logo sequence to the opening shot of the event. The camera moved slowly from side to side, focusing on a group of about seven people who couldn't have been more than a couple of feet from the lens. I quickly realized that each of these individuals was important in some way. Included in the group were QB, the woman from the thumbnail, and her competitor Ms. Fit. The central figure, acting as the host, began verbally introducing the battle league, pausing to exclaim: "East Coast make some noise!", which elicited a resounding mix of "yeahs!" and cheers from those onstage and from the audience offstage, at this point still blocked from view by the foregrounded group in front of the camera. While I understood this as a rap event, it was different than most of what I had experienced up to this point. TV and radio had presented sleek, polished music videos, studio productions, and televised performances. This was markedly raw in a way that further drew me in.

The host then moved to introducing the two battlers. As she did, the camera panned to each of them. They each gave a verbal introduction filled with personal shout outs; next to their faces on the screen were graphics that displayed their stage names, hometowns, battle records, and links to their twitter profiles. I was immediately struck by the inclusion of place names in this informational graphic. I knew how important place was in Hip Hop, and particularly in rap music. The East-West divide defined rap of the 1990s, with stylistic differences and personal

beef blurring the lines between rap and real life. Two of the most famous rappers—Tupac Shakur and the Notorious B.I.G.—had their lives cut short because of these place-based antagonisms. As I was growing up in the late 90s and early 2000s, place remained important, even if its role was less pernicious. Where a rapper hailed from—the region, state, city, neighborhood, and sometimes even the street that they claimed—conveyed information about their musical style and sound, their upbringing and their affiliations, and often lent validity to the very lyrics they spit. The graphics that appeared next to the rappers were part of an important means of identification that I was only aware of subconsciously at that point in my life. They were intended to convey important contextual information before the battle began. Although the reason for this had eluded me, it was another early point of intrigue.

Despite all of this interesting front material, it was the battle itself that solidified my interest and that set my trajectory toward a critical, academic interest in battle rap. The intensity displayed in the thumbnail only captured a small portion of all that was actually on display in the battle. While sitting in that classroom watching the battle, shock and fascination fought for control over my mind. The most vivid feeling that I recall was the simultaneous invigoration and stress brought about by the battle's hyper-intense competitiveness. Even watching the battle on my cell phone screen brought forth very real feelings in my body. I could feel the almost sweat-inducing pressure of the face-to-face verbal confrontation happening onstage. Without knowing the rules of battle rap, it seemed that at any moment these rappers could have made the leap from rapped competition to physical confrontation. During the battle, they stood directly in front of one another, sometimes coming within inches of each other's faces. It became clear that in battle rap, anything and everything is up for grabs. Each rapper at one point or another wielded the

other's physical appearance, race, gender, sexual orientation, sexual history, rap history, group affiliations, and family against them, all with the goal of coming out on top.

Balancing this, however, was a sense of pleasure that came from these same moments. When a rapper spit[4] a complex set of bars with a double meaning, or when they delivered a particularly scathing and hard-hitting point, a shot of dopamine and adrenaline rushed through my body. It was one of the coolest things I had seen. Lyrics as weapons. Every aspect of an individual's existence on the table. The most memorable bars[5] that the two rappers spit were the ones that lyrically eviscerated their opponent. To this day, I still chuckle when in her second round Ms. Fit proclaimed:

> You flat chested, tits
> no hang time
> You ain't a Crip but your teeth
> throw up gang signs
> And your face? Wait. stop it. you the reason blind dates. ain't poppin'.[6]

The allure of these lines was in the balance between their direct verbal attack and the comedic content and delivery. It felt like watching a dance of sorts. Each emcee moved lyrically and physically in and out of each other's spaces, at times reaching the precipice of physicality, but

[4]The term "spit" in Hip Hop Culture means to rap; it can also be used to highlight the actions of someone who raps with a particular adeptness.

[5]A bar is a musical term that is coterminous with a measure of music; in battle rap the term has multiple meanings: a bar is the smallest musical unit in the genre; bars are also particular types of spoken lines that focus on complexity in wordplay and meaning-making. Additionally, battle rappers typically organize their rounds into "bar phrases" which—as it sounds—are made up of two or more bars that are related topically or stylistically to one another.

[6]Throughout this text I will employ ethnopoetic transcription in addition to straight transcription to capture the dynamism of spoken language. **Font sizes** represent relative emphasis or de-emphasis of words or syllables: the larger the font size, the more emphasis the artist placed on the sound; the inverse is true with smaller font sizes. **Spacing** between words is congruent with the perceived space between words—greater spaces represent longer pauses. L**ine breaks**, in turn, represent pauses which I believe warranted a significant break in the idea. **Apostrophes** between different words represent elision of those words. **Dots** between words represent an intentionally even spacing between those words. Words in **asterisks** describe action or onomatopoeic sound rather than a phoneme.

never crossing it. Even before thinking about the depth of meaning and the social, economic, and political value systems at play in bars like these, it was the antagonism, comedy, and confident delivery that kept me watching.

My first experience with battle rap as a sophomore in high school was key in setting me on the trajectory toward critically analyzing and coming to terms with battle rap that I'm on today. It has informed the body of theory from which I draw, and colors how I choose to frame my argument in this thesis. For seven years after that first experience, I continued watching rap battles online, becoming a member of an online community of artists and fans. Watching new battles, I came to understand some of the ins and outs of battle rap not only as a musical experience, but also as a social one (or at least, as much as was visible through a computer screen).

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In this thesis, my goal is to demonstrate how battle rap participants craft an antiessentialist black space through practices of space-taking, and how that black space in turn allows for that antiessentialist ideas of blackness to be put forth by battlers onstage in the building. In this way my thesis is comprised of two smaller, interconnected projects. The first looks at the roles of battle rap participants—battlers, fans, and battle league administrators—in collectively taking space around a battle rap event. As we will see in chapter 2, this occurs through the display of practices which are themselves iconic to blackness—Hip Hop fashion, the public smoking of tobacco and marijuana, a black orientation of time, and reflective conversations about the battle rap world itself. The second focuses specifically on lyrics and the ways that battlers lyrically contribute to antiessentialist notions of blackness by variously promoting and denigrating certain ways of living blackness for the sake of competition onstage.

In chapter 4, I discuss prominent themes that are common across the battle rap world: explicit articulations of blackness, language markers, historical markers, geographical markers, street life, and references to iconic figures. By weaponizing blackness itself as well as practices and people associated with certain types of blackness, battle rappers put forth their own ideas on what it means to live blackness positively vs live blackness negatively, and in the process, open up room for conversation about the multifacetedness of this category that is often reduced to simply "black". In both of these ways, battle rap participants construct and maintain a black space in which antiessentialist notions of blackness are allowed to exist simultaneously and be critically examined by all participants.

Battle rap's singular form among contemporary black performance practices has been prefigured by a number of other traditions that were significant in African American communities over the past century. As Hip Hop scholar H. Samy Alim astutely put it, "We know that rappin in and of itself is not entirely new—rather, it is the most modern/postmodern instantiation of the linguistic-cultural practices of Africans in America."[7] Discursively, the emphasis on narrative sequencing, call and response, signification, and tonal semantics,[8] and aesthetically, the emphasis on things like complex rhythm, high affect juxtaposition, ephebism, and the aesthetic of the cool[9] are all remnants of older black performance traditions like the toast, and even an immediate precursor to battle rap—the street battle.

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[7]Alim, H. S. *Roc the Mic Right: The Language of Hip Hop Culture.* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 79.

[8]Smitherman, G. *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America.* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977).

[9]Thompson, R. F. *African art in motion: icon and act in the Collection of Katherine Coryton White.* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974).; Thompson, R. F. *Aesthetic of the Cool: Afro-Atlantic art and music.* (Pittsburgh: Periscope publishing, 2011).; Gottschild, B. D. *Digging the Africanist Aesthetic in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts.* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996).

Black oral performances are characteristically narrative both in their transmission and in their contents. That is, many black performance traditions are passed down by word of mouth, and the majority of performances themselves center around telling a story or stories. The oral-aurality of black American performance was at least in part a function of the sociohistorical conditions of black people in the United States. For centuries, black Americans were systematically excluded from the normative modes of acquiring and transmitting knowledge which governed the society in which they were forced to exist. Reading, writing, and classroom education, as well as the communicative benefits that come from each, were unavailable. As such, oral performance traditions became more than means to entertainment. They became educative tools for the transmission of practical, historical, genealogical, and spiritual knowledges within and between Black American communities. To make do, black communities oriented themselves around oral-aural axes of reckoning with meaning.[10] Instead of foregrounding reading and writing as a way of transmitting and receiving knowledge, this axis instead relied on word of mouth and the ear—an effective way to circumvent exclusive, white-centered scriptocentric knowledge of institutions like the academy.

In the following section, I will look at two precursors to contemporary battle rap to establish a precedent for the discursive contentions with blackness found in the genre. Despite being dislocated from one another in time, in toasts, street battles, and contemporary battle rap, black artists all perform blackness through artistically embedded practices either in tellings of preexisting stories or in the artists' own lyrical creations. In thinking about how this happens in

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High affect juxtaposition refers to overlapping or starkly shifting affective moments in a performance, ones that forego transitions that pad the discomfort between dissonant feelings and expressions. Ephebism encapsulates the energetic, youthful vitality of Africanist aesthetics (Gottschild 1996).

[10]Kochman, T. "Culture and Communication: Implications for Black English in the Classroom." *Florida FL Reporter*, 7, no. 1 (1969) 89-92, 172-75.

each genre, I hope to link the ways in which black performers of the past performed blackness, to the ways battle rappers perform it today. Chapter 2 will continue the narrative sequencing of the introduction to describe various points of significance in the experience of the line, the period of active waiting leading up to a battle rap event. With this, I will demonstrate that it is not only *lyrics*, but also the *practices* of battle rap participants that help craft the black space that provides a home for antiessentialist notions of blackness to exist onstage. Chapter 3 will move from the line into the building. In this chapter I will look at one battle in detail, which I was in the building for, and focus primarily on the performative elements at play. Finally, Chapter 4 will move away from narrative—broadening the scope of analysis to look at a number of relevant means by which battle rappers perform antiessentialist notions of blackness in both themselves and their opponents. To do this I draw from ethnomethodology to consider not only how battle rappers perform blackness, but to consider its larger impact on and reflection of a broader worldview in which blackness is complex and refined rather than simple and monolithic.

Toasts to Street Battles: Early Black American Oral Performance

The toast, for example, is a Black American genre of oral folk poetry which became a topic of academic inquiry in the 20th century. As a mode of oral performance, toasts arose in the early 20th century—and remained prominent through the 1970's. I chose to draw connections between toasts, street battles, and contemporary battle rap for a number of reasons. First, toasts as narratives as well as toasts as performed poems are generally built on commentary about the realities of race in the United States; these commentaries influenced early rap music and have undeniably shaped the current moment in contemporary battle rap's complex lyricism. Additionally, the length of many toast narratives and the contexts in which they were performed are through-lines first to street battles and, later, to contemporary battle rap.

Toasts are rhymed narrative poems whose tellers performed them in a variety of colloquial contexts, a fact that led folklorists such Bruce Jackson to dub them as a sort of "street theatre." His emphasis on performances arises from the fact that toast tellers not only narrated stories, but did so while giving life to the characters. However, toasts were not traditionally found onstage, but on streetcorners, at parties, and in jails and prisons. Within these contexts they were often performed among small groups of people who regularly interacted with the toast teller with laughs and commentary of their own. Toasts rely on oral transmission in performance and in the passing of the stories themselves. Unlike battle rap, toasts tell stories that are told and retold. The toast's unique performance style is its answer to the sociohistorical context that led oral modes of communication to take precedence over written forms.

While toast narratives retain core elements of their story as they are passed down through the generations, each performer distinguishes their own version by performing it in unique ways—altering the text as well as their performance choices (e.g. vocal characteristics and physical embodiment of the stories). Even one teller's performance choices can vary from telling to telling. In respect of this dual task of toast performers, I have chosen to refer to them as arranger-performers. Toast arranger-performers typically caricaturize the characters in the stories they tell, bringing them into even closer contact with the real world by hyperbolically performing what would be recognizable to audiences as everyday personalities and personas. If the toast is "street theatre," then toast tellers are more akin to actors than reciters. Each arranger-performer employs linguistic and rhetorical strategies to highlight certain aspects of blackness, and by contradistinction, whiteness, in the characters they are portraying through their oral performance—strategies like choices of inflection, use or non-use of Black English, direct or indirect references to characters' races and genders, etc.

The stories that toasts tell employ narrative to convey information drawn from "the life experience of the people who tell and listen to them" and whose characters are "exaggerations of roles known on the street," though they are often set in different times or places from those individuals.[11] Through both of these qualities, and in the particular demonstrations of them below, I situate the toast alongside battle rap as a black American performance genre which comments on race through purposively exaggerated performance of quotidian racial realities, drawing them out from the fold of the everyday and into a comical, impressive vibrancy in the moment of performance. By commenting on realities of race in performing toast narratives, toast arranger-performers engaged in a similar intellectual-artistic project to the one battle rappers engage in today.

One of my favorite toast narratives is *Shine and the Great Titanic,* specifically the rendition of this popular narrative committed to wax by the popular word-master Rudy Ray Moore.[12] Moore's version of the Titanic narrative (by all accounts, one of the most frequently performed toasts in 20th century Black communities) is more than just an entertaining listen; *Shine and the Great Titanic* is rich with commentaries about blackness and whiteness, coded and uncoded. Both the primary character, Shine, and the secondary and tertiary characters that he finds himself conversing with, draw on common tropes and ponder alternative imaginaries of black and white relationships in the United States. In this tale, Shine, a black man working in the ship's boiler room, escapes the sinking Titanic by jumping overboard. As he swims toward shore, several of the ship's passengers implore him for assistance in their own escapes from the

[11]Jackson, B., *Get Your Ass in the Water and Swim Like Me: African-American Narrative Poetry from the Oral Tradition*. (New York: Routledge, ed. 2004).

[12]It's important to note that while Moore's rendition of this toast story was recorded in the early 70s and later uploaded onto YouTube, that the recording of toasts outside of academic purposes was not typical.

doomed vessel. Each of these other passengers—the details of which vary by arranger-performer, though often including a robust rich man, the rich man's daughter, and the captain of the ship's wife—embody anxieties about relationships between blackness and whiteness. Shine's responses to them serves as a retelling of traditional narratives that either foreground white saviorhood or white oppression.

To be black in a toast, especially for the main character, is to hyperexperience the contingencies lived by Black Americans—particularly those in the Life—every day.[13] Shine, while boastful, is only so in light of the overconfidence of the white and white-adjacent characters whose misplaced belief in themselves and their technologies blinds them to their impending demise until it is too late. Only once the ship begins to sink and Shine has already jumped overboard and is swimming away is he called upon by white characters willing to trade money, prestige, sex, and solidarity for help to safety.

The primary antagonist to Shine from the beginning of the narrative is the captain of the ship himself, a powerful white man. In Moore's telling of the narrative the captain is constructed as directly oppositional to Shine[14]:

> So Shine run up on the deck
> He said "Captain, there's water damn near up to my neck".
>
> Captain said "Go back and pack the sacks"
> said "I'm sure that's enough to keep that water back"
>
> Shine looked at the captain said "Captain you standin' here steady bullshittin' and drinkin'.
> Can't you see that this big bad motherfucka' is slowly sinkin'?"

[13]'The Life' is term for a way of life characterized by exploitative, illicit activities which often involved the same characters as appear in toasts themselves—pimps, players, and tricksters (Jackson, 2004; Wepman, Newman, & Murray, 1974)

[14]Col. "Shine and the Great Titanic." from *Rudy Ray Moore Greatest Hits, YouTube*, 6:04, 0:35. Posted August 5, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=km7UB_DfnKI

Captain said "Shine I told you to fear nor doubt,
'fore I take one of these two by fours and wear yo black ass out."

The white Captain is oppositional to Shine in more than the obvious sense of being his rude boss. Shine transgresses his occupational and broader social position as a working-class Black man by calling into question the Captain's work ethic and his sanity in vehemently pointing out what he sees as obvious—the ship is sinking! In retort, the Captain threatens physical violence on Shine; but again, the relationship is not simply an employee-employer one, as he is threatening Shine's "black ass." The captain not only rejects Shine's warning because Shine is a manual laborer, but also because Shine is a black man whom the captain sees as being out of his place. This oppositionality between whiteness and blackness, played out through the characters, continues throughout the rest of the story.

A particularly salient example of these racial anxieties as it relates to issues within the black community occurs later in the narrative after the ship has begun sinking. The captain's wife calls out to Shine, who at this point has jumped from the ship and started swimming to land. In Moore's telling, the Captain's wife is, notably, a black woman—light skinned or mixed. To appeal to Shine's African American sensibilities, she calls out, "Said Shine said I been through the cotton field and said I waded through the mud/Said Shine I must confess I'm a true soul sister, and you know that we are the same blood."[15] The response that follows this plea provides insights into the anxieties around the dividing lines of black and white worlds, particularly when those lines are crossed. Shine responds[16]:

Bitch, said you can talk so sweet and you can beg so fine
but you shouldn't'a brought your high yella ass across that motherfuckin' color line
Said you know that I'm the one that you call the boiler room flunky,

[15]Ibid, 2:19.

[16]Ibid, 2:33.

So keep yo imitation white ass on this motherfuckin' ship and drown with that honky

Here we see multiple anxieties at play. Perhaps the most obvious is that of the traitorous black person—in this case, the captain's wife—who has both socially and physically crossed the color line. Socially in the sense that now, she participates in the subordination of fellow black people, demonstrated by her reference to Shine as a "boiler room flunky."[17] Physically she has also presumably crossed the color line by occupying white spaces as the wife of the white captain. She isn't below deck in the boiler room, isn't in the kitchen or serving in the dining room, and isn't, generally, tending to the needs of white people, as many black folks at this time still would have been. Instead she chose to accept the upward mobility afforded to her by marrying into whiteness. In an ironic twist, this very decision to occupy white spaces led her to occupy white spaces all the way to the bottom of the ocean. Shine wasn't disposed to helping someone he saw as a traitor, and so she ended up sinking, as all versions of this toast end, with the thousands of white people about the Titanic.

Yet at the same time, there is unease in reconciling with the fact that as much as she has turned her back on Shine and other black people, the captain's wife is still very much one of them. As much as the captain's wife may try to act white to distinguish herself, it can never change her objective situation as a black person. By referring to the captain's wife as "high yella" and "imitation white," Shine is simultaneously justifying and delegitimizing the distinction between her and other black people.[18] "High yella" refers to a lighter brown skin complexion with yellow undertones. Mentioning this not only re-establishes her a black person, but as one who was able to leverage her light skin tone to carve a space for herself (and only

[17]Ibid, 2:45.

[18]Ibid, 2:38, 2:47.

herself) in the white world. In opposition to Shine's "black ass," we can see issues of colorism and accessibility at play. It is interesting how explicitly this particular illustration of colorism is in conversation with its historical lineage. The dark-skinned field nigga, light-skinned house nigga dichotomy is at play. While she evoked the image of the cotton field, if she is as high yella as Shine professes, she may not have been in the field at all, historically speaking. But in calling her "imitation white," Shine is making a blatant statement that she is no convert, but rather a sellout. Overall, in this case I think Shine would agree with Zora Neale Hurston's assessment that all skinfolk ain't kinfolk.[19]

The narrative closes with Shine reaching land and engaging in braggadocio and revel. Though the particular details of the toast's conclusion change with different tellings, Moore's version sees Shine in Chicago, bragging about his escape:[20]

> When the news was broadcasted that the great Titanic had hit this big iceberg
> Shine was in Chicago on Cottage Grove and 63rd
> Down on his knees sayin' "A nickel I shoot and a dime I hope to pass"
> I left ten thousand mothafuckas swingin' on they ass
>
> Everybody wondered why I didn't drown
> But I had a card stuck up in my ass so I couldn't go down
>
> So when I die y'all can bury me deep
> Put some sorghum molasses at my feet
> And put two fat biscuits in my hand
> So I can sop my way to the promised land.

Having pulled off a great escape and overcome both physical and racial adversity, Shine returns to the black community and satirically tells them of his adventure. This moment in the story parallels Moore's own real-life telling, as the reference to Chicago, and specifically to Cottage Grove and 63rd street—an area on the South Side of Chicago—conjures an image of an urban

[19]Hurston.

[20]Col. "Shine and the Great Titanic", 5:02.

black neighborhood where toasts were likely told. Taking on a satirical "I tried to warn 'em" tone, Shine recounts his getaway and comically proposes a reason for his own survival that reflects a certain performativity in and of itself, again paralleling how Moore himself is telling the tale in real life. Moore closes Shine's tale with a light-hearted reference to black comfort food as a sort of reward for his life once he dies.

Notably, in a way that parallels the performance of racialized knowledge in contemporary battle rap, the last line about the promised land is consciously seated among a long history of communicative parallels in African American communities. As slaves existed and resisted in the United States, messages and stories from the Christian Bible, specifically the story of Moses freeing the Israelites from Egypt, became metaphors for the experiences of slaves in America. The "promised land"—originally the land of Canaan in the Bible—became a stand-in for the general idea of a place of freedom. Moreover, during the 20th century Great Migration—the time in which *Shine and the Great Titanic* is set—black southerners often referred to Chicago as the promised land. Moore's choice to employ that reference here draws a strong connection between this performance and black history more broadly for people who understand the deep history of the term.

As I mentioned earlier, toast tellings don't only vary between arranger-performers, but also between different tellings of the same story by the same arranger-performer. The above ending by Moore is certainly one of his tamer conclusions. In another by Moore, Shine ends up in Harlem, drunk, out of money, and by the end of the story, dead, ready to fuck the devil and all the poor souls in hell. His displays of sexual adventurousness are surely celebratory—celebrating both Shine's survival by common sense, and tacitly, as Jackson indicates, his triumph

over whiteness.[21] While this may not justify the crassness of the concluding acts, these acts, like Shine's personality traits, do caricature experiences encountered in the everyday. In the Life, the successes of money and women are products of dark acts of exploitation through hustling, gambling, coercion, and prostitution.[22] Reflecting reality, even when the main character is successful, toasts always include resolutions which touch on the dark contingencies of success in the alternative economies of the Black American Life.

Alongside the racial commentary of the narratives themselves, toast arranger-performers also bring their characters to life through various performative means that rely heavily on the exaggeration of distinctions. As we will see later, highlighting and exaggerating distinctions is also a prominent performance tactic in contemporary battle rap. Insult in contemporary battle rap draws directly from other black American oral performance genres like the dozens, in which opponents exchange insults with each other in real time. The characters of toasts employ analogous patters of insulting in a third-person frame; in doing so, they prefigure many of the same strategies for insult used in battle rap today.

Shine and the Great Titanic is just one of hundreds of tellings of dozens of toast narratives that craftily comment on and reimagine the realities of race in the United States. Though fictitious, the poignant observations and critiques made in narratives such as *Shine* helped lay a foundation for contemporary genres of Black oral performance like street battles, battle rap, and various genres of poetry which combine performativity and complex coding with either fictional narrative or discourse drawn directly from real-life experiences. By taking a

[21]Jackson, B. 2004. *Get Your Ass In the Water and Swim Like Me.*

[22]Wepman, D., Newman, R. B., and Binderman, M. B. "Toasts: The Black Urban Folk Poetry". *The Journal of American Folklore* 87, no. 345, (1974), 208-224.

normative approach to blackness, these tales conjure worlds in which dynamic ideas of blackness are central and unmarked.

Another stylistic and topical precursor to contemporary battle rap is the street battle. Street battles are competitive, freestyled lyrical duels in which emcees face off literally and artistically in the moment of performance. As a form of dueling discourse, street battles have acted as "sites of identification wherein rhymers fashion themselves and others within and across various social identities" via lyrical expressions that are simultaneously personal attacks and understood in the context of play.[23] Sociolinguist H. Samy Alim draws a parallel between street battles and street fights in the moment of performance, noting that battlers are like fighters who must quickly come up with a strategy to win in the heat of the moment, drawing quickly from memory and observation of the current situation.[24] Indeed, this simultaneous sense of community—wherein rappers playfully hone their crafts in the space of street battles—and competition—wherein rappers suspend or enhance their extrinsic relationships with one another in order to frame the other as a competitor—forms the backbone of many street-situated forms of rap, including contemporary battle rap.[25] Unlike toasts which are often a topic of inquiry for folklorists, street battles have been analyzed for their discursive *and* social significance by sociolinguists, sociologists, anthropologists, ethnomusicologists, critical race and gender theorists, and more.

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[23]Alim, H. S., Lee, J., Carris, L. Mason. "'Short Fried-Rice-Eating Chinese MCs' and 'Good-Hair-Havin Uncle Tom Niggas': Performing Race and Ethnicity in Freestyle Rap Battles." *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 20, no. 1, (2010) 117, 116-133; Lee, J. "Battlin' on the Corner: Techniques for Sustaining Play" *Social Problems* vol. 56, no. 3 (2009) 578-598.

[24]Alim, H. 2006. "Roc the Mic Right".

[25]Spady, J. G., Alim, H. S. and Meghelli, S. *Tha Global Cipha: Hip Hop Culture and Consciousness.* (Philadelphia, PA: Black History Museum, 2006).

Street battles arose to prominence alongside other community-centered variations of rap, like ciphers, in the decades immediately following the rise of Hip Hop itself. As both names suggest, street battles most often take place in the streets—that is, the sidewalks, street corners, shops, and live music venues that mark the same landscape that rappers and fans traffic in the every day. Additionally, they require rappers to engage in a difficult lyrical practice—freestyle. Freestyle is a practice in which a rapper must create bars at the spur of the moment without prewriting. As we will see later, though moments of freestyle still have a place in contemporary battle rap, it has mostly been foregone in exchange for even more lyrically complex battles. Therefore, it's no surprise that since street battlers must freestyle, the propensity to craft lyrics based off of common experiences and spur-of-the-moment observations pervades.

Much like toasts before them, the topics of street battlers' rounds often draw from characters and practices from rappers' everyday lives. Unlike toasts, street battlers tend to present their verses in a non-narrative format—commenting directly on the people and practices directly in front of them rather than employing these people as characters in a larger story. The passages below, taken from H. Samy Alim, Jooyoung Lee, and Lauren Mason Carris' transcription of a battle between Pterradacto and Lil C-Note, provide an example of how racialized realities are commented on in the moment by freestyle street battlers:[26]

2. P: nigga,
3. yo stache look like somebody shrunk wrap [that bitch

4. LCN: so what

5. P: nigga, shut up

6. LCN: my shit look fresh

[26]Alim, H. Samy, Lee, J., and Carris, L. Mason. 2010. "'Short Fried-Rice-Eating Chinese MCs'" 127.

Alim, Lee, & Carris' transcription reflects the casual nature of freestyle battlers, demonstrating how emcees often respond while the other is spitting. Additionally, they include audience response.

7. P: put some heat on that face

8. LCN: I got good hair though
9. my nigga [(xx) (xx) (xx) ((wipes hair back to front))

10. P: yea,
11. that's~what~all Uncle Tom [niggas say

012 A: Ooooooooooh! Aaaa:

Initially a purely aesthetic comment on the size of Lil C-Note's moustache, the passage here quickly turns into one in which the emcees weaponize different takes on blackness in order to save face and outperform one another. In line 008, Lil C-Note's comment about having good hair can be read in terms of the common idea—even within black communities—that value judgements of hair quality tend to favor proximity to European beauty standards. By using this as his response, he attempts to place himself in preferable position in relation to Pterradacto *because* he has "good hair". However, to combat this, Pterradacto calls Lil C-Note's legitimacy as a black person into question by calling him an Uncle Tom, a long-standing insult within the black community that connotes subservience to white people. In this short passage we can see how even on the fly in a freestyle battle, emcees draw from the everyday (literally the visual information right in front of them) in addition to larger networks of black knowledge to combat each other verbally during street battle performances.

Perhaps it is for this reason that street battles are more often discussed in terms of their social significance while toasts are often discussed in terms of literary significance. While toast arranger-performers typically operate within the confines of prescribed narratives, individualizing details and their own way of performing, street battlers more freely theorize on topics and emphasize connections between them. As a result, street battlers are more akin to

(organic) intellectuals or authors than to actors or arrangers. As we delve into the world of contemporary battle rap, we will see how the foregoing of freestyle makes the street-intellectual connection even stronger by building on the customizable preponderances of toasts as well as the direct everyday commentary of street battles.

Contemporary battle rap, in both the fictional narrative forms of the toast and the real-life story crafting and life telling of street battles, continues the tradition of Black American performance traditions as a "performative process through which African Americans come to understand, reinforce, and reflexively critique who they are in the world."[27] Yet the particular ways that battle rappers perform, as well as how battle rap culture is organized, makes it unique among other black American oral performance traditions—even one as closely related as street battling.

Contemporary Battle Rap: An Introduction to Form and Function

Contemporary battle rap arose over the past decade and a half alongside the business entity known as the battle league. If street freestyle battles are like street fights, then battle rap is a boxing match. Battles have become less reliant on freestyle, and instead rely primarily on prewritten verses. It's no longer sufficient to fight the good fight in the moment. Now you have to train, study your opponent, and on the day of the event remember all that you've learned. Entire events consisting of multiple sets of battles—called cards—are billed by battle leagues, drawing crowds from across the United States. Even the aesthetic of cards reflect those used for boxing events, with competitors' images edited and placed face-to-face, a foreshadowing of their showdown at the event. While smaller leagues often retain the street locale—hosting events in local event spaces, shops, or still the occasional street corner—large leagues often book gyms or

[27]Johnson, E. Patrick. "Black Performance Studies: Genealogies, Politics, Futures." in *The SAGE Handbook of Performance Studies* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2006), 446-463.

large concert spaces to host battle events. Monies flow through the leagues, the battlers, and the fans, and contracts govern the rules and regulations of battles—none of which are dominant factors in street battles (or street fights for that matter).

The points at which battle rap diverges from street battles can be summarized in two primary distinctions—the commodification of battlers' skills and battle leagues' facilitating roles, and formalization of process. A clear distinction between battle rap and most other black American oral performance traditions is the monies that flow in and around the performance. Battle rappers are generally paid professionals who are compensated based on skill, gender, region, and league size. This isn't to say that they aren't also, and perhaps predominantly, artists who are connected to the streets, but the money likely shapes how battle rappers view themselves in relation the Culture. As we will see through my ethnographic fieldwork, battle rappers occupy a unique position in the battle rap community—sometimes roaming freely in this space alongside fans, and other times elevated socially (and often literally) via the stage, special sections of venues, and through certain experiences reserved for battlers. Fans pay to attend events, and these monies circulate up through the levels of battlers, league owners, leagues and sponsors. These money flows, in turn, necessitate a level of formality in the events and their performances. Commodification as a process necessitates that which is commodified can be exchanged for money. As rappers' skills and the experience of attending an event are what's being commodified, the return expected from paying fans is quality performances and an overall positive experience.

Thus, battles are contract-based. These contracts determine the performers' pay, the number of rounds they are expected to write, the length of those rounds, and more. These contracts are handled privately between leagues and artists. Given rap's history as an alternative

mode of acquiring capital (in the diverse Bourdieusian sense) and because of its contemporary balance between connections with alternative economies—like drug sales and distribution, stripping, sex work, etc.—and licit economic activities, the balance between local expressions of blackness and the corporate monetization of the battle rap world are both key elements of battle rap verses, as we will see later.

Just as the financial and logistical elements of the battle rap have been formalized, so too have the ways in which battlers create. In lieu of freestyle, battler rappers today are generally expected to come with prewritten rounds. While eliminating much of the spontaneity from the event, this system of pre-writing and planning still allows for battler's rounds to carry the semantic and semiotic weight of street battles. While freestyle is mostly relegated to individual additions within a rappers' round, the *appearance* of freestyle pervades in contemporary battle rap. Battlers spit long verses, sometimes for as long as 10 minutes, without reference to notes, and they do so with incredible speed and smoothness. Additionally, verses are written with the opponent generally in mind. While there is no way to predict with surety what an opponent might say about you, the general targetedness of rappers rounds often make it appear as though they've done just that.

The main benefit of prewritten rounds is that battlers are not creatively limited to what their minds can produce in any given moment. Even just a bar or two often carries two, three, or four layers of meaning that are not isolated, but connected intricately and intentionally with the rest of the verse. Some of the most complex schemes can carry on for much longer than a few lines.[28] For example, in a 2014 battle, Cee the Boss opened her first round with a 16-bar phrase which employed no less than ten references to Jay Z songs and two album titles to underpin her

[28]A scheme is a term in battle rap used to describe an intentionally intertextual section in a battle rap verse in which the primary meaning is undergirded by one or more unifying themes.

primary bars, which themselves denigrated and threatened her opponent Deisel (Brackets in the following transcription offer my own clarifying identifications, with titles that contribute to the scheme in bold): [29]

1. {Yeah,} Cee a renegade **["Renegade"]** bitch, I live a hard knock life **["Hard Knock Life"]**
2. Look like you suck a glass dick [crackpipe], and live a hard rock life
3. You rock hard right? Well D my bitches pop all night
4. Have her beggin' like "can I live?" **["Can I Live"]** and get you popped on sight

5. Fuck a bounty and a bag cuz my vixens, they rock toys
6. I ain't gotta call my niggas point 'em out, we rock boys **["Roc Boys"]**
7. Act tough I'm in your face like nigga what? Nigga who? **["Nigga What? Nigga Who?"]**
8. No hook **["No Hook"]**, straight bullets comin' right for your crew

9. We from two different worlds **[*The Best of Both Worlds]***, this is Venus vs Mars **["Venus vs Mars"]**
10. Your struggle is in your mouth cuz your story don't match your scars, I'm a god…
11. I'm a god, so you think I give a fuck, if D evil? **["D'evil"]**
12. Big beak ass bitch I really think, D single

13. Where I'm from? I'm from the heart of the city **["Heart of the City"]** where lead fly, Bedstuy
14. Put the beam on her pupil, that's red eye
15. How many Hov songs I named? **[Hov is one of Jay-Z's nicknames]** But fuck it we off that
16. Me and Yeezy, we just watchin' the throne now chalk that **[*Watch the Throne* was a joint album by Jay Z and Kanye West (Yeezy)]**

Though remarkably complex, schemes such as this are quite common in today's battle rap where one metric for artists' skill is lyrical complexity. However, it is not only the sheer complexity that makes this bar phrase interesting to me. We will return to this specific example in the third chapter because it is a prime example of the complex *racialized* information that is often encoded in battle rap lyrics that constructs blackness as a given rather than an exception. It isn't

[29]Queenofthering "Babs Bunny & Vague presents Queen of the Ring Cee the Boss vs Deisel." *YouTube*. 19:08, 3:40. Posted April 18, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hxoF2_EEwHY

just about what rappers say, and it isn't just about how they say it, but it is also about how *much* they can say in a new way and how many layers of meaning they can embed within one another while maintaining a rhythmic character.

These distinctions in preparation, performance, and commodification indicate a singular combination of characteristics that differentiates battle rap from other black American performance traditions like toasts, street battles, and commercial rap music. Yet despite the decreased influence of lyrical spontaneity and an increased formalization of rap verses and the events at which they occur, battle rap remains connected to the street art that it originated from. Battle rappers in the U.S. context continue to draw from quotidian, extraordinary, and in both cases, antiessentialist, aspects of the lives of black people in the United States.

Most of my examples throughout this thesis come from female battle rap. This is simply because of my familiarity with female battle rap, and although gender isn't the focus of this thesis, it means that I have to discuss the intersecting roles of gender and blackness in battle rap spaces. Despite the battle rap world's openness in thinking about blackness, it is still weighed down by the gendered stereotypes and misogyny that are often embedded in Hip Hop elsewhere. In fact, the most recent joint card between Ultimate Rap League and Queen of the Ring—two of the largest battle leagues—was called "Kings vs Queens" and it consisted exclusively of intergender battles. During the faceoff, a sort of preshow where opponents sit across from one another and talk their shit, one of the questions asked to each pair of battlers was why they thought they would win. The following conversation between female battler 40 B.A.R.R.S. and her male opponent Tsu Surf is a prime example of many of the ways in which male battlers and female battlers conceptualize themselves in relation to the other:[30]

[30]QueenoftheRing. "KINGS VS QUEENS | FACEOFFS | URLTV." *Youtube.* 2:24:50, 2:11:39. Posted on October 16th, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qTjBHwvT344.

Jay Blac (host): 40, why do you win tomorrow?

40: Cuz like I said I'm the better rapper. I want it more and I think it's more important to me than it is to him.

Tsu: It's for sure more important to you let's be clear about that.

40: Of course it is and that's okay, I'm not ashamed to say that.

Tsu: It's for sure. But I beat people jokin' wit' em, I beat people when I joke.

40: You think that's something I should be ashamed of? No I get that, I get that, but he was asking me if you allow me to finish my thought.

Tsu: I don't take anybody seriously.

40: Then you can say what you do if you allow me to complete my thought.

Tsu: Oh I'm sorry…I should let you speak.

40: I appreciate it, or just allow me some respect, you can't allow me to *speak.*

Tsu: I apologize.

40: Thank you, moving forward, I'm going to *win* because I'm a better rapper, like I said I want it more, it's more important to me. He can downplay the situation—all the guys are giving us a shot—they're clearly on a bigger platform. The women have clearly not been considered the guys' equals for fuckin' ever, so let's not act like this is something new. This is what we're here to show, that we can play with y'all like that.

Both the topic of conversation, as well as the style of conversation, exemplify the typical treatment of gender in battle rap. While there is deeper nuance to be explored in further projects, particularly about how rappers respond to gender stereotypes in their lyrics, this conversation shows how male batters are often the most revered—receiving the most views, credibility, and better pay. Female batters, despite their skill, typically receive poorer treatment. In the above conversation, we can read Tsu's nonchalantness about the battle—saying that he never takes opponents seriously—as a counter to 40's claims at being a better rapper. Additionally, his interruptions of her, followed by her pushback and demand to be able to finish her thought, can easily be read as a respective maintenance and challenge of gendered modes of speaking.

Interestingly, in a new online format that allowed fans to vote on their winner for each round of the three-round battles at "Kings vs Queens", 40 would go on to beat Tsu Surf 2-1 the next evening.

……

The boundaries of a battle rap event cannot be drawn without recognizing and coming to terms with the elements that act against logics of linear time and physical proximity. In battle rap, for every hour spent at an event, for every moment of debate and excitement waiting in line and in the performance venue, there are countless more spent by individuals dislocated in time and place from the event but engaged in the larger network of knowledge and meaning-making that characterizes battle rap as a musical, discursive space. Transitioning from a totally online experience of battle rap to attending my first events in 2019 and early 2020 has raised questions about the importance of both of these elements of community, and the aspects which are and are not shared between them. For example, watching rap battles online compresses a full day of attending a battle event into multiple, digestible, individual battles. Online videos of battles also don't typically show other elements that characterize the in-person experience of attending an event, including the lengthy waiting-in-line to enter the space, the moments in-between battles, and the various offstage interactions between battlers, between fans, and between battlers and fans.

This is the lens through which I hope to discursively highlight the relevant themes of race, space, and community at play in battle rap. In so doing, I am drawing on both lyrical data and in-person ethnographic experiences. Since most rap battles are freely available on YouTube, I use these recordings as sources from which to transcribe and think through battle rappers' lyrics as they pertain to race, and its performance in battle rap spaces. Additionally, I use the videos to

corroborate my claims about physical performance and about the spaces in which rap battles occur. I also draw from in-person participant observation at three battle rap events that took place from May 2019 to January 2020. The main narrative of this thesis revolves around one of these experiences which took place in Richmond, Virginia on January 11, 2020.

Chapter 2 focuses on the process of space-taking that occurs in the line, as battle rap participants wait to enter the venue. Chapter 3 moves from the line into the building, continuing the discussion of space-taking and then focusing on one battle from the "Royalty" event to begin discussing the discursive work around blackness that occurs onstage. The final chapter, Chapter 4, moves away from the narrative to look at performances of blackness across battles, foregrounding themes of explicit articulations of blackness as a category, language markers, historical markers, geographical markers, and references to street life and black figures. By creating this trajectory through the rest of the thesis, I hope to demonstrate the significant role that blackness has in battle rap spaces and, alternatively, how battle rap serves as a black space in which participants complicate the idea of blackness through their lived experiences in the space, and discursively through rapped lyrics.

CHAPTER 2: THE LINE

For me, the beginning of a battle rap event can be thought of as the moment one enters the line. Elsewhere, scholars have talked about the importance of lines and pre-event rituals for solidifying the tone of events. The line outside of a battle rap event prefigures the black space that is integral to the performance of battle rap in the building. It serves as a space for building anticipation and creating space—a space for fans to gather, recap past experiences, and prepare for the battles ahead.

Battle rap events take place in cities across the United States, oftentimes in neighborhoods and venues which are not typically black spaces. Of the three events that I have attended, one took place in a rented-out boxing gym in Brooklyn, NYC; another was in a live music space in Charlotte, NC; and the third was in an event space in Richmond, VA. Of these, only the first would likely be considered a space of color, and even then, as a boxing gym, it was certainly not a totally black space. Yet for the battles, each space comes to exist as a transient, insular black space—lasting for the duration of the event and coalescing in different locations at different times. The line, as the point of convergence for most of battle rap's constituents, acts as a space of community-making and space-taking. The practices that occur in the line—which are characteristic of black ways of living outside of these events—are fairly consistent from event to event.

It was January 11th, 2020, a Saturday, at around 12:15 in the afternoon. Despite being the middle of winter, the weather was a pleasantly mild 64 degrees. I'd finally arrived in Richmond, Virginia after a two-hour drive through the tree-lined I-85 corridor from Chapel Hill, North Carolina. For the entire ride my anticipation was building. What kind of venue will this be? Which battlers will I see roaming around offstage among the crowd? Am I going to arrive early enough? How long will the line be? Thinking about the experience that I was about to have compounded the excitement in my mind. By the time I arrived, I was more than ready to get out and experience the event.

Stepping out of my vehicle and turning the corner onto N. 18th street, my curiosities transformed into the excitement of experience. About 700 feet down the road I noticed the beginnings of a line forming on the sidewalk outside of the venue. There were only 40 or so people currently waiting; the doors weren't slated to open until 1:30 p.m. after all. The 700-foot walk from my car to the line—about a city block and a half away—gave me time to recognize the unseasonably mild weather conditions that day. The pleasant touch of coolness in the air—exacerbated by the motion of my own body as I briskly walked down the sidewalk toward my destination—aptly highlighted my own fresh excitement. Each event is different from the last and I was about to begin a day full of new experiences.

As I walked down the street, I also began to take in the sights and sounds of this district just southeast of downtown Richmond across I-95—the Shockoe Bottom. Without ever having been here before, this area still struck me as familiar—the juxtaposition of architectural styles, of old and new buildings and old and new communities. It exuded the busy, diverse atmosphere of repurposed warehouse districts so common in today's revitalizing U.S. cities. The six-foot-wide sidewalk—made of brick—highlighted this repurposed past to me. Modern breweries and

cantinas that drew more affluent crowds were interpolated between an old pizza shop, a local barbershop, and an exotic hair store. The center of movement, the two-lane N. 18th street was flanked on both sides by parking lanes, which on this day were completely full, and those brick sidewalks on which I continued my trek toward the line.

The people around appeared as diverse as the area itself. A white couple who appeared to be in their 20s strolled down the street hand-in-hand. Groups of families and friends of mixed races, ethnicities, and ages enjoyed the open-air patio at a cantina cattycorner from me, taking advantage of this beautiful winter day. Two older black men—who from their black aprons adorned over white shirts I assumed were barbers at the barber shop—stepped in and out of their place of business, sometimes to smoke, sometimes for a chat. Another older black man walked up and down the sidewalk in tattered clothes, selling flowers. A black woman who appeared to be in her 30s or 40s walked up and down the sidewalk, dancing and singing loudly, taking little notice of anyone else. My first thought was that she was afflicted by mental illness, drug use, or perhaps both.

For such a small street, it was busy. I could see down to the nearest intersection, half a block past where the line began. At each sequence of the stoplight, six to eight cars queued waiting for the light to turn green. As a result, there was never a silent moment, with car tires skirting along the pavement, the crescendo and decrescendo of radios as cars drove by with their windows down, and idling engines in muffled anticipation of that green light. Indeed, the constant noise and activity heightened my anticipation as I came closer and closer to my destination. Finally, I reached the end of the line, not far from where it turned the corner into the alleyway through which we were to enter the venue. Though I stopped moving, my day was just beginning.

From a fan's perspective, this is the starting point of a battle rap event. This is where the event transforms from imagination to a reality. Where existing with other fans in this new space transforms it from its regular functions to a space in which blackness is experientially and discursively central. This existing-in and contending-with blackness begins not in the venue, but in the line itself.

When I reached the line, I immediately felt like I had arrived. My sense of building anticipation—indexed by my motion—shifted to a more still, but still anticipatory, waiting. Others continued to arrive, and the line continued to grow behind me. As I waited and watched I began to realize the social import of this period of time that seemed, on its surface, to be static. The line is a place where a black space forms around the battle rap event, and where fans recapitulate past experiences and prepare for the event ahead. Throughout these processes, rituals and social practices constitute the line and the subsequent event as a black space sometimes in congruence with, and sometimes despite, the geographical context. The amount of time spent in line is important to understanding this. Unlike other live musical events, battle rap events don't typically follow a rigid time schedule. Instead, they follow a timeline similar to other African American community events like block parties or church services. Hence, though the doors to the venue were slated to open at 1:30 p.m., they didn't actually open until closer to 4:00. This seems to be typical of battle rap events, though I would argue that rather than being an error in scheduling, this is the byproduct of an organization of time that reinforces the notion of this space as a qualitatively black one. The temporal organization of the line renders the entire experience of waiting significant to the constitution of this event as a black space. It allows time for fans to gather, recapitulate past experiences, and prepare themselves for the event to come.

In the remainder of this chapter, I address these three processes—formation, recapitulation, and preparation—all of which coexist within the larger moment of the line.

Formation

As I stood and waited in line, I noticed that it was quickly developing into less of a line and more of a semi-linear agglomeration of individuals hanging out along the sidewalk. It sounded like a block party, with the sounds of urban life—cars on the pavement, horns blaring—juxtaposed with the chatter, laughter, joking, and jubilation of the individuals awaiting entry into the event. Vehicles driving by, playing music with the windows rolled down, provided a convenient backing track.

As people continued to arrive in line behind me, I became increasingly aware of the ways in which battle rap constituents temporarily reconstitute spaces into black spaces. All around me were African Americans of various shades of black and brown. Being in an environment in which black people are the majority—especially in the U.S. context—resonated with me at a visceral level. Most were dressed in some form of their best, and even those who were dressed down radiated a sense of fashion—whether that was conspicuous displays of status or simple color-coordination; stylishness seemed almost a precondition for attendance. Some female-presenting attendees wore dresses and heels with large statement jewelry, while others wore jumpsuits, and still others jeans and fresh sneakers; many male-presenting attendees, in turn, wore jeans or shorts, Polo shirts, t-shirts, chains, rings, and clean sneakers or boots. As I stood in that line I felt more strongly present in my body, more keenly aware of my posture and the presence that I was putting into the space. On this day, I had chosen an outfit that would make me feel a part of this specific black experience—a blue polo shirt with a yellow emblazoned Polo horse logo, a gold chain with a lion-head pendant, a rectangular gold ring that sat both on my

middle and ring fingers, khaki pants, and matching navy-blue Timberland boots. As I had learned by attending other battle events, this outfit would fit well within the diverse displays of fashion in the space. While aesthetic norms helped to visually characterize the event, it was not only aesthetic practices that transformed this line into black space, so too did social practices.

The minutes went by as I stood in line, not having moved far from my original spot about 40 people back. Over the course of my wait, I could feel the air changing. As more people arrived at the event and waited in line, the crisp bite of a mild winter day began to mix with scents of tobacco, and later marijuana, smoke. Just like the cool air initially indexed my anticipation of this fresh event, the heavier scents indexed a settling in. The line continued to shift away from a linear form and toward a hundreds-of-feet-long mass of people on a sidewalk. Some groups who came together were turned inward chatting in partial circles. Other people leaned on the building adjacent to the sidewalk, faced forward, or chatted and cracked jokes with others in the line.

In front of me were two women who had come together, and in front of them was a group of three men and two women. At one point about an hour in, the larger of the groups lighted a blunt and passed it between themselves. My mental association between the scent of the blunt and the space that was coming into existence around me took me back to the other events I had attended the year prior. Recreational marijuana use is a regular act of community-building not only among individuals in Hip Hop communities, but in communities across the globe who socially imbibe in weed. After passing the blunt between the members of the group, they looked back to the two friends standing directly in front of me and asked if they wanted to hit. Both friends said yes, in turn deeply inhaling the thick smoke, holding it in, and then releasing it back into the air. After sharing the blunt, the larger group opened their partial circle of conversation

to include the two women whom they'd just met. This probably unconscious act of transgressing the norms of keeping to one's own group at large events is one apt example of ways in which this transient, black, battle rap space operates on its own logics of community socializing. It's a space in which sharing a blunt with a stranger is not necessarily dangerous or frowned-upon. Instead, it actually served as an icebreaker of sorts, leading to further interaction.

It also demonstrates one way in which the line serves as the beginnings of the space that will exist primarily in the building itself. As I will delve into later, the brazenness of this act on a Richmond city sidewalk exemplifies battle rap's (and the line's) constitution not only via social practices, but also by intentional acts of space-taking by battle rap's primarily black constituency.

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The line itself physically and socially embodies experiences and ways of living common to other black spaces. This includes practices which lie outside of white social and legal constraints. In this way it represents not only a taking-up of space, but literally and figuratively temporary space-taking.[31] Battle rap as an event is transient in nature. Although battle leagues are often associated with particular cities (e.g. Queen of the Ring is based in New York City), the venues and neighborhoods in which events take place can vary greatly from event to event. Even in cases where multiple events put on by the same league are held consecutively in the same venue, the events are characterized by a transience—the venues are all rented, and thus not specifically designated battle rap (or black) spaces. This transience characterizes battle rap events and necessitates temporary actions that allow members of the battle rap community to

[31]Mcann, Eugene J. "Race, Protest, and Public Space: Contextualizing Lefebvre in the U.S. City" *Antipode* 31:2 (1999): 163-184.

take an already an existing space and turn it into a functioning black space for the duration of the event.

One way that this happens is through aesthetic practices. Hip Hop aesthetics are rooted in a long history of practices employed by black communities as visual indexes of group belonging. Within this system, fashion is perhaps the most notable visual mode through which participants demonstrate their relationship to Hip Hop culture. Individual styles shine through by both adhering to organizing principles of black American aesthetics and often subverting elements of those same principles. Nicole Fleetwood wrote that, "Hip Hop fashion, like the music, flourishes through the 'mixing' of elements as diverse as high-end couture, found artifacts, tagging (or brand-naming), and sports apparel"; she goes on to claim that "Hip-Hop fashion and music—and black cultural practices in general—complicate simplistic cultural models that posit authenticity against appropriation, or originality against commercialism". [32] Indeed, in the line, for every polo shirt there was a plain black t-shirt. For every high heel or timberland boot, there was a pair of Air Jordans or Chuck Taylors. Hip Hop fashion—much like the black experience more broadly—refuses to be reduced to a stylistic singularity, but rather is characterized by the craft of creativity itself. The admixtures of types of clothing and various adornments and accessories visually give the line a Hip Hop aesthetic, superimposing the collective cultural vibrancy of Hip Hop cultural participants over the regular streetscapes around which battle rap events take place.

In dressing to reflect notions of group belonging at local and macro-cultural levels, battle rap constituents also regularly express coolness as a characteristic of Africanist aesthetic

[32]Fleetwood, N. "Hip-Hop Fashion, Masculine Anxiety, and the Discourse of Americana" in *Black Cultural Traffic: Crossroads in Global Performance and Popular Culture.* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 326-345, 327, 328.

practices more broadly. Calling back to Thompson's and Gottschild's respective works on Africanist aesthetics, the constituents of the line are actively and passively engaged with many of the same precepts as performers.[33] For example, while ephebism sonically and visually characterizes many performances of Africa and the African diaspora, when considering performance more broadly, we can also see the sartorial tendencies of battle rap's fans in the line as indexical of not only blackness, but a blackness which incorporates this youthful vitality offstage as it does onstage or on camera.[34] This youthful vitality itself is characterized by the willingness to be creative; to make and break trends and to use and repurpose existing aesthetic symbols in accordance with both individual and broader cultural desires for representation. While Hip Hop fashion is by itself multifarious, it is also an exemplar of battle rap's recognition of blackness in an antiessentialist sense.

As much as sartorial representation dominates the visual landscape of the line—helping to establish the space as a black space—scents of marijuana and tobacco smoke and the sounds of jubilation also occupy the sensory-scape of the street. Smoking marijuana is a regular community-building practice at battle rap events. Individuals and groups of friends frequently take turns taking a hit from a blunt, creating an experience of common euphoria while socializing. As we saw in the example above, this practice can also provide a way to transcend norms of socialization, providing yet another way for individuals and groups who may not otherwise interact, an icebreaker. It also serves *to reinforce the taking of space* sensorially, legally, and economically in areas which are otherwise public and often not located in black

[33]Gottschild, Brenda D. *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance*, 1996.; Thompson, Robert F. *Aesthetic of the Cool,* 2011).

According to Gottschild, ephebism is the energetic, youthful vitality of Africanist aesthetics,

[34]Ibid.

neighborhoods.[35] In terms of space-taking, smoking is perhaps the most brazen practice that occurs at battle rap events.

None of the states in which I attended rap battles had legalized recreational use of marijuana; yet smoking—both outdoors in the lines and indoors in the venues—was consistent at all of them. In fact, at one event there was even a vendor of cannabis-infused confections selling their products in the very same space as the rap battles occurred. Such practices—which have been theorized as physiological and social acts of resistance since the dawn of colonialism and the normalized exploitation of non-white labor and culture[36]—in battle rap spaces can also be seen through the lens of resistance. It is a denial of the criminalization of practices common to many African diasporic—specifically Hip Hop—communities, and a reconstitution of the very terms of existence within the effective space of battle rap's reach during an event. This statement extends to the sensory-scape as it stakes an aromatic claim which reinforces the visual, auditory, and physical claims already made by those in the line. Indeed, marijuana use's neglected Pan-African social and economic history points to this as a piece of space-taking that is part of larger tactic of resistances engaged in by African and African diasporic communities for centuries.[37]

Up to this point we've dealt with practices that construct battle rap events as transient, insular black spaces. However, time is also a key force. In battle rap spaces, the orientation of time itself is co-constructive with space-making and space-taking in the formation of battle rap's black space. Several black scholars of African culture have written extensively about cultural

[35]Duval, C. *The African Roots of Marijuana,* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

[36]Duval, C. *Cannabis,* (London, UK: Reaktion Books LTD, 2014).; Lee, M. *Smoke Signals: A Social History of Marijuana—Medical, Recreational, and Scientific.* (New York: Scribner, 2012).

[37]Duval. 2019. *The African Roots of Marijuana.*

time orientations among African and African diasporic populations.[38] The duration of events tends to be contingent upon the desires of attendees, rather than fitting into a predetermined schedule. In these black cultural frameworks, time is generated by people; people are not governed by time. More recently, scholars of Black time have begun to think about both space and time as increasingly important logics through which blackness is lived—logics that must be carried through to academic writing lest a project inadvertently reduces blackness through what Michelle Wright dubs "qualitative collapse."[39] Wright argues that this reduction happens when the logics of lived black time and space are forced into linear logics in researching and writing-up research. My hope with the structure of this thesis is to provide a complicated organization of time and space which is not necessarily linear—it oscillates between temporalities of the past, present, and future, in-person and online spaces of connection, narrative and academic forms of writing, and modes of discourse which variously center artistry and critical meaning interpretation.

Importantly, while each of the above practices and norms are key in constructing battle rap's black space in spite of an event's physical location, they are also key topics of discourse in rappers' lyrics on stage. That is, these practices aren't givens, but—along with blackness itself—are constantly being discussed, reinforced, and reworked in the line and in the building.

Recapitulation – where online and *the* line meet

While standing in line, I noticed a conversational trend that reflected the transgressional smoking instance I had seen before. At all three battle rap events I'd attended, those who stood

[38]Adjaye, J.K. "Modes of Knowing: Intellectual and Social Dimensions of Time in Africa," *KronoScope* 2:2 (2002): 199-224; Holloway, J.E. "Time in the African Diaspora: The Gullah Experience" in *Time in the Black Experience*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994).; Mbiti, J. *African Religions and Philosophy*, (New York: Praeger, 1969).

[39]Wright, M. *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology,* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015). 142.

around me consistently recapped and debated the results of prior events and battlers' records. Two guys behind me, for instance, were talking about the return of 40 B.A.R.R.S.—a battle rapper who had had a few off performances but was making her comeback that night. One didn't believe that she'd be able to beat her opponent; the other was split between whether or not she'd be successful. Hearing, this, I chimed in with my own thoughts, since 40 was and is my favorite battle rapper. I asked, "you don't think she'll be able to do it? I have faith!" This generated mixed reactions from the gentlemen, with the less sure of the two giving me a fist bump, and the other jokingly commenting "aw come on man, I don't know about that." These conversations are most often the catalysts for individuals and groups of individuals to begin interacting with one another as a larger community. It was not atypical to hear other conversations of people who "watched that shit online!" before proceeding to discuss their thoughts with others around them in the growing agglomeration of fans on the sidewalk.

These seemingly mundane conversations were so ubiquitous at every event I'd attended, that it was clear they also played a large role in how battle rap is constituted as a black space at events. The line affords a space for bringing together online and in-person experiences for the purposes of building a community of interest constituted by individuals who may never have met one another, and also strengthening the connections between this particular event's community and the ongoing, largely discursive battle rap community that isn't singly located in time or space. Through the process of recapitulation in the moment of the line, battle rap fans reinforce a network of in-person and online community that itself transgresses the boundaries of time and space.

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The lines at all of the events I've attended were marked by these conversations about previous events and how different battlers performed at them. These conversations, far from trivial, help to reinforce battle rap's transient black space by engaging with bars and their meanings in these conversations. In calling upon the personas of battlers and particular moments in battles, battle rap fans begin to demonstrate the importance of critical self-awareness at every level of battle rap. On top of attending a battle rap event for one-off entertainment, fans, battlers, and league administrators are constantly aware-of and engaging-with battle rap as a broader network of interactions on- and offstage that build on one another over time. This critical self-awareness is not only a reflection of past moments but an active fortifying of those bonds and ideas that bind battle rap participants together as they experience a battle rap event live in person or online in the comment section underneath a video.

In the moment that I described earlier between myself and the two gentlemen standing next to me, we can see that fans, also and importantly, engage in this practice. Without having met these individuals before and without any typical social introductions, we were able to enter into dialogue with one another as a result of our shared interest in battle rap and a shared presence in this black, battle rap space. Despite the novelty of these types of interactions at the in-person event, comment sections underneath YouTube videos of rap battles are flooded with thousands of similar dialogues which not only deal with battle rappers' records, but which reflect ideas about blackness and the role that battle rappers play in its construction onstage.

Digital spaces like YouTube have provided new forums for individuals to collectivize and participate in shared meanings that were previously only accessible via in-person gatherings or dislocated "conversations" through texts and responses a la academic discourses. With respect to battle rap, specifically, its online component allows fans to discuss and debate not only

battles and results, but also the rich meanings that are encoded in rappers' lyrics. Under any rap battle on YouTube a viewer can find myriad conversations that give further information on the lyrics rapped, debate the perceived truthfulness of those lyrics, debate the battle's outcome, and place the battle in context with battle rappers' larger careers. To explore just how situated these discourses are in larger conversations about battle rap, rap music, Hip Hop Culture, and the black experience in the U.S., I will work through two examples from comment sections which I feel demonstrate these interconnections in distinct ways. In the first, individuals discussed a battle rapper's bar phrase that referenced a highly public killing of a young black boy—Trayvon Martin. The second touches on events that are unfolding as I am writing this thesis—the Covid-19 pandemic and the rejuvenated popular interest in black lives in the wake of the highly public murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others.

An example that I found demonstrative was one of the top comments under the 2016 battle between 40 B.A.R.R.S. and E-Hart. 40 B.A.R.R.S. is widely thought to be one of the most lyrical, bar-heavy battle rappers. Her bars regularly challenge listeners to engage critically with them in order to comprehend both their surface-level meaning and their encoded meaning(s). In her battle against other notably lyrical battler, E-Hart, the comment section was filled with this kind of critical engagement between fans. With 244 likes, one of the top comments on the video highlighted one of 40's bars by simply quoting it followed by four fire emojis " 'Don't judge the kid by my clothes like Trayvon that's no justice' 🔥🔥🔥🔥."[40] This comment referenced a larger bar phrase in 40's first round:[41]

[40]YOSHISWAGGIN, 2017. Comment on "E HART vs 40 B.A.R.R.S QOTR presented by BABS BUNNY & VAGUE (FULL BATTLE)".

[41]Queenofthering. "E HART vs 40 B.A.R.R.S. QOTR presented by BABS BUNNY & VAGUE (FULL BATTLE). *Youtube,* 43:53, 15:50. Posted on February 12, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=opxBLxkxtUw.

1. So why the fuck should I think you tough? Cuz you wear corn rows and baby tees and…
2. I take pride in my appearance, you some killer that ain't afraid of me?
3. Just cuz you look the roughest and they assume who's the toughest
4. Don't judge the kid by my clothes like Trayvon that's no justice

Beneath this comment are eight replies which further the discussion in a number of ways. The first respondent remarked that "40 is jus different man u can tell that bih got some education behind her ass!!!!!!"[42] in recognition of both 40's lyrical prowess and her intellect—her critical awareness of this then-current event and her ability to incorporate it smoothly into a layered passage of meaning. 40 doubly employs "the kid" as a reference to Trayvon's young age, highlighting that his death was caused by a racialized judgement of his hoodie by a white man, and also as a term of self-reference, telling her opponent and the audience not to judge . Indeed, this passage connects back to the aesthetics that I discussed earlier, speaking to the fact that individuals in battle rap spaces often resist assumptions between outward appearance and attitude or actions. While the acquittal of Martin's killer was an injustice felt deeply within the black community, 40 also posits that false assumptions about her are an injustice to her abilities and artistry.

It's clear that bars like the one quoted by YOSHISWAGGIN construct battle rappers not only as musicians, but also as knowledge producers and disseminators. I conceptualize this knowledge as much more than a "folk knowledge" or "subjugated knowledge"—that is, they are not simply passive reactions against the social conditions of the United States. The ideas that battle rappers put forth onstage are dominant in this space, and the interplay between these ideas constitutes an *active* effort to undermine essentialist renderings of blackness in the U.S. Rather, I

[42]Smiley Lightfoot, 2019. Comment on "E HART vs 40 B.A.R.R.S QOTR presented by BABS BUNNY & VAGUE (FULL BATTLE)" in response to YOSHISWAGGIN.

consider the ways in which it provides a total counterhegemonic forum for dealing with the realities of blackness in local terms governed by those who live the experience on a daily basis.

This is all the more salient now, in this moment of writing. It's mid-October 2020 and a few months ago George Floyd was murdered by a Minneapolis police officer—inciting backlash across the globe. It's also the middle of a pandemic. As is often the case, battle rappers and battle leagues have become local commentators on these issues in real time. One battle league in particular, Superior Entertainment Arena, has made do during this time of isolation by organizing online battles. The artists recorded themselves from their homes and the league put together the videos and uploaded them to YouTube. The most recent of these battles was C3 VS Chetta. The battle itself began with a rousing two and half minute clip of black activist Tamika D. Mallory speaking on George Floyd's murder and the larger state of black people in the United States, followed by clips of protests around from around the country. As the voice of Tamika trailed off, the screen faded to black with "BLACK LIVES MATTER" in stark white letters, followed by "#GEORGEFLOYD".

As in the above example, the comment section is filled with debate and commentary about the battle, but also about the battle's unique, pandemic-oriented format. One writer remarked, "S.E.A. I want to thank y'all for getting us through these times being in quarantine. Female battle rap lives on 👊💯!![43] This comment explicitly touched on the Covid-19 anxieties felt around the world; at the same time, it also touched on the unifying potential of battle rap, even in an online forum. Indeed, although the battle was special in that the emcees were dislocated from one another physically, the forum for continued engagement provided by this and other remote battles is a testament to the online-in-person framework that battle rap had been

[43]Echo Rockmore, 2020. Comment on "S.E.A. PRESENTS RETURN OF THE MACK C3 VS CHETTA".

operating in for years. As user cellyjohnson said "This was good. The culture won on this one."[44]

Battle rap's role as a counterhegemonic forum is particularly salient when considering the fraught relationship between Hip Hop and the academy. The academy, as the representative, if not actual, seat of hegemonic knowledge in the United States is built upon ways of thinking that exclude blackness as a way of being. In this sense, in Gramscian terms, battle rappers—who speak and perform directly against this hegemonic knowledge by demonstrating and presenting blackness as central—are acting as organic intellectuals.[45] Coming from a relatively powerless group, they stand apart in positions of creative leadership. As another respondent astutely suggested, "She's self-[taught], like most of our super smart brothers and sisters are."[46] This comment exemplifies the deep, two-way distrust between Hip Hop knowledge and academic knowledge—the very distrust that I hope to write against. Importantly, it is also a colloquial statement of the bottom up perception also written about by black scholars, about "the inability of academic institutions and individuals to read and value the discreet and nuanced performances and theorizing of African Americans."[47]

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Sitting here writing this thesis as a biracial man who is situated firmly within the academic system as a graduate student, I can't help but feel a little bit of discomfort when I read comments like this. Am I not a "super smart brother"? Have I forsaken my status as a 'brother'

[44]Cellyjohnson, 2020. Comment on "S.E.A. PRESENTS RETURN OF THE MACK C3 VS CHETTA".

[45]Gramsci, A., Hoare, Q., and Nowell-Smith, G. *Selections from the prison notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. (New York: International Publishers, 1985).

[46]Amérique Indien indigene, 2019. Comment on "E HART vs 40 B.A.R.R.S QOTR presented by BABS BUNNY & VAGUE (FULL BATTLE)" in response to Smiley Lightfoot.

[47]Johnson, E. Patrick. 2006. "Black Performance Studies: Genealogies, Politics, Futures."

altogether for a life of traditional scholarship? It is this very distinction—the supposition on both sides that it must be either one or the other—that I hope my work contributes to dismantling.

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Online comments often manifest in in-person interactions in the line. Experientially, this bridges the gap between the seemingly-distinct online battle rap community and that which gathers at an event, yielding an experience that—as my descriptions above suggest—is vastly more involved. Taking a Gramscian approach to the idea of knowledge production and dissemination, both the online and in-person battle rap communities form a total system that acts against hegemonic ideas of blackness which demonize it in relation to whiteness—as when Amérique Indien indigene suggested that most of our super smart brothers and sisters are self-taught—or reduce its possibilities to stereotypes—as when 40 refused to be written off as a rapper simply because of the nature of her appearance. Recapitulating previous thoughts and experiences in the space of the line tightens the connections drawn across time and space between battle rap fans, which in turn allows fans to look ahead toward the event to come, armed with contextual performance background and the ideas of multidimensional realizations of blackness that battle rap facilitates.

Preparation

The *formation* and *recapitulation* that occur in and through the moment of the line make way for *preparation*—a turning toward the event to come. Unlike the other two phenomena which are necessarily social, preparation is personal, but with social ramifications. Initially, as I waited in line, activity among *fans* dominated my perception. After the first two hours had passed, however, other figures central to the battle rap experience began arriving, which finally culminated in the movement of the line and our eventual entrance into the venue.

While the administrators of battle leagues typically arrive before any of the fans, they don't wait in the line. Their arrival at the line—whether coming out to greet some of the fans, saying hello to acquaintances waiting in the line, or just walking by—prompts a moment of excitement that reinvigorates the line's energy. The first non-fan that I saw arrive at this event was Debo, the league owner of Queen of the Ring, the group that was putting on this event together with Ultimate Rap League (the most prominent battle league today). Donning a white button-down, a black overcoat with a deep purple paisley pattern, black pants, dress shoes, and a black fedora, Debo's aura encapsulated the cool energy of the line. When he rounded the corner out of the alley with the venue's entrance, I noticed that he was taking the time to shake each fan's hand as they waited. When he got to me, I felt a stressful pressure to perform coolness back to him, while internally I battled the adrenaline-driven urge to freak out over seeing what amounts to a celebrity in the battle rap world. Debo proceeded down the line, and as time passed, other important figures arrived—their presences turning the attention from recapitulation back to excitement for the event ahead.

Soon, I saw battle rappers whom I'd watched for years, and others I was unfamiliar with, strolling past the line with their respective social groups into the venue or congregating right outside the door. Quickly the line transformed from a space of social looking-forward to one of a more formal sort. As battle rappers and other battle league administrators arrived, many Hip Hop media outlets also showed up, positioning individuals right on the sidewalk to conduct interviews.

Coincidentally, one of these interviews happened right in front of me. Another member of Queen of the Ring's administration—Vague (formally, Grindseason Vague) had arrived and was talking with friends and acquaintances in the line. Then Unkle Ra, a media personality who

runs 15 Minutes of Fame radio, asked Vague for an interview—par for the course for battle rap administrators at battle rap events. Hilariously, another gentleman behind me in line shouted out that he wanted his own 15 minutes of fame and asked to be interviewed too. In keeping with the spirit of joviality in the air, Unkle Ra began the interview by saying "Yo uh, Fifteen Minutes of Fame man, Vague and—this guy."[48] Even in jokingly asking and answering interview questions however, this interaction displayed the same knowledge and connectedness of battle rap fans that the interaction with the two gentlemen directly behind me had done a few hours earlier.

After the fan introduced himself and where he was from, Unkle Ra asked why he was at the event, who he'd come to see. "I'm out here to see Chess bark on Tori Doe, period" a comment that was met with "oooo's" and "okays" from Vague and other fans in line. Unkle Ra continued, asking if he was there to see anyone else, and the man mentioned Ave, who was slated to battle Nu Jersey Twork. With this statement the man expounded a bit more, saying "I got Ave takin' it, 3-0", referring to the typical battle rap format of three-round battles. This was met with some more skeptical "oooo's" and a couple of verbal challenges from other fans in the line: "3-0?" said one, while Unkle Ra added, "Even if he don't choke? Nobody can beat Twork if he don't choke."[49] This interaction on camera represents many of the off camera conversations that battle rap fans have in line. At this point, the line was turning toward the event itself, as opposed to prior events. When the interview continued with its original subject, Vague, the questions and comments shifted to higher level meta commentary on the event.

[48]15MOFERADIO. "VAGUE OUT WITH THE FANS AT ROYALTY TALKS QOTR VS URL". *YouTube*, 6:01. January 12, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ru5ltzdRMyU.

[49]Ibid.

Battle rappers occupy a unique space of quasi-celebrityhood, oftentimes "elevated literally and figuratively above the audience [fans] but only partially. They also represent and are deeply implicated in the people and standards of the battle rap community." [50] While this was most easily recognizable when they were onstage in the building, even in the line there was a sense that these individuals were simultaneously part-of and yet distinct-from the broader battle rap constituency in meaningful ways; reflecting once more a contemporary Gramscian relationship of battle rappers to their larger community.[51] Like seeing Debo earlier, seeing other battle rappers that I had watched for years on YouTube elicited feelings of awe and excitement. It was like seeing your favorite celebrity or athlete only a few feet from you. Battle rappers were not separated by the fans in any real or total way. Even socially, many of the individuals in their close social groups would also identify as fans, and alternatively, many battle rappers mingled with fans who regularly attended events, even if they weren't part of their immediate social group.

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The line at a battle rap event is an active site of space creation leading up to the battles on the day of a battle rap event. In it, fans, battlers, and league administrators come together around practices that are both particular to battle rap and common to other black communities in order to come together, recapitulate past experiences, and prepare for the event ahead. In doing so, each battle rap event serves to reify existing connections between people and ideas in the battle rap world, and build a new set of experiences atop previous ones.

[50]Davis, J. "Rapping Blackness". *Anthropology News* Website, September 12, 2019

[51]Gramsci, A., Hoare, Q., and Nowell-Smith, G. 1985. *Selections.*

The line began moving forward and I had finally reached the alleyway in which the venue's entrance was located. Fans were slowly entering the building; as the line crept forward, the sky became overcast and a slight drizzle started. This made me only more anxious to get inside. Yet the excitement of the line was not drowned out by the rain; it simply provided a new condition for jokes and laughter as we all awaited our turns to enter. Just before entering, everyone had to undergo a patdown by venue security for safety. After being cleared, I stepped up onto the elevated doorframe and into the cool, dark entryway, moving into the venue primed for the night of battles to come.

In the space of the line, blackness is enacted by battle rap's participants and mapped onto the streets in which events take place. By coming together physically along sidewalks, battle rap participants visually transform the space, this space-taking also happens through a range of other practices, including aesthetic display, an alternative conception of time, smoking, and reflective discourse about battle rap itself. By openly living such antiessentialist forms of blackness, battle rap's participants create a transient, insular black space that carries over into the building and lasts for the duration of the event. In the next chapter I will continue the narrative into the building, first exploring the experiential transition from the line to the building, and then focusing on one battle that happened on the night of the "Royalty" event. I will analyze this battle with both discourse and performance in mind, preparing us to think in broader terms about lyrical examples from multiple battles in the final chapter.

CHAPTER 3: IN THE BUILDING

The entryway was small, dark, and filling with people filing in after they'd completed their pat downs. Though it was hard to see through the darkness, the room in which we entered was close to rectangular, measuring about 30 feet wide and 15 feet long, with the door along one of the long sides. The scene was hectic as people entered with jovial chatter, excited to see the venue where the battles would soon begin and looking to get out of the now dreary conditions outside. I could see the light from the main room emanating from the curtained terminus of a short hallway directly in front of me, and a staircase to my right that led to a 2nd floor balcony that overlooked the primary space below. The temperature of the building was strikingly cold. Because of the unnaturally warm January day, the venue staff had been running the AC in anticipation of this highly attended event. Despite the chilling shock of the air-conditioned air hitting my damp shirt, it was still a reprieve from the quickly cooling and drizzly weather outside.

With little time to collect my thoughts, I hastily decided to take the stairs up the second level, hoping to find a spot to stand that had a good view of the stage. If there's one thing I've learned about attending battle rap events in person, it's that there is always a shortage of comfortable places from which one can see the stage. I walked up the dark staircase and could soon see a bit of light emanating through the doorway, though the balcony was still relatively dark, since most of the lights turned on were downstairs. The balcony formed a complete rectangle over the main floor. To my left was a bar; its lights, however, were off as it was still being restocked and cleaned before the event began. Right in front of me, along the railing, were

a few tall tables; these didn't remain long—most of them were moved to allow more people to stand along the railing and see below. Looking down over the railing and onto the main floor, the stage was to the right. I tried to find a standing spot as close to the opposite side of the balcony from the stage as possible, so that I'd be able to get a frontal view of the stage. The portion of the balcony directly opposite the stage was already taken, but I managed to get a spot near one of the corners of that railing.

The sounds continued to increase as I stood there, watching people walking in, ordering drinks and food at the downstairs bar, and finding their own places to stand. While the upstairs standing room was organized by the railing, the downstairs was much more like a concert, with people standing in one large mass, constantly shifting and taking up any open spaces. Every time I attend one of these events, I'm impressed at the number of people that attend. Watching battles on YouTube doesn't do justice to the size of the crowds that come from across the United States to watch rappers go head-to-head. Apart from watching people file in, I also enjoyed looking around to see which battlers and other notable personalities I could spot in the crowd. Before battles, before the stage becomes a site for elevated status in the space, battlers roam amongst the rest of the attendees, not escorted by security but often with their friend groups. It has always fascinated me to see that juxtaposition in person.

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Onstage

By the time that most of the crowd had moved from the line to the inside of the venue, the space had transformed in ways which reflected the construction that had occurred in the line. A drone of chatter continued to fill the room, some of it casual, some continuing conversations about battlers, past battles, and expectations of the night. The stage itself was filling up too, with

battlers and their friends taking their special places to view the battles up close and personal. Debo—the man in the purple paisley suit from the line—took the stage with a microphone to make a few initial announcements, which was a sign that the battles were about to begin. He thanked everyone for coming out and recalled the long road it had taken for Queen of the Ring to build to this point over the past 10 years. As a longtime viewer of Queen of the Ring, it felt rousing to know that I, along with so many other people in the room, was a part of that journey. Vague, the Queen of the Ring host interviewed by Unkle Ra in the line, took the stage next, eliciting some crowd participation with the familiar "make some noise!" directive.

A few minutes after the welcome/pump up, Vague, Debo, Babs Bunny—Vague's cohost at Queen of the Ring events—and Smack White—league owner of Ultimate Rap League—moved on to announce the first battle. This one was a surprise, a battle, that wasn't listed on the card. If the anticipation of the battles on the card wasn't enough to get everyone pumped up, a surprise extra battle was certainly a pleasant way to start the event. The two emcees—Robin Rhymes and Fiirst Ladii Flamez took the stage, and with Robin's first round the "Royalty" battles officially commenced.

The rest of the night from this point was filled with impressive displays of lyricism, play, performances of blackness, and theorizations about black realities in the United States. For the remainder of this chapter, I will analyze the discourse that occurs onstage, and situate it within the practices that constitute battle rap as a black space, and within the multiplicitous realities of blackness which fuel these lyrics in the first place.

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To work through some of the ideas presented in battle rap verses, I've chosen to conduct a performance-centered, narratively conveyed analysis of one of the battles at the QOTR

"Royalty" event. This battle between 40 B.A.R.R.S. and Ms. Hustle, two heavyweights in the female battle rap world, was probably the most highly anticipated battle of the night. Both of these women had been battling for the better part of a decade and every aspect of their arsenal has been honed to the highest level of artistry—performance, intellect, wit, and the ability to employ each of them in a cohesive round. As a result, their three-round battle provided rich performance and lyrical examples of the ways in which battlers contend with blackness onstage at battle rap events. Importantly, it isn't just what battlers say that allows them to establish blackness as normative and to imagine its possibilities; just as important is the fact that they treat blackness as normative by calling upon various aspects of black experiences unmarkedly—that is, by relying on shared experiences and knowledge instead of explicit references to blackness. In the next chapter, I will expand this analysis outward to include additional expressions of performed blackness from across the battle rap world, thus both reinforcing elements present in this battle, and highlighting other significant elements that were not.

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40 B.A.R.R.S. vs Ms. Hustle was one of the most highly anticipated battles on the "Royalty" card, and was the reason I was so excited to come to this event. Because of this anticipation, this battle was one of the final battles of the evening—many events are organized in this kind of save-the-best-for-last order. By this time, I was feeling light-headed from all of the marijuana smoke in the building, and also from being on my feet for hours. Despite not knowing the exact time (looking back it was around 10:30 p.m.) I was able to tell from my aching feet and my general sense of time that it had been quite a long time since my arrival at noon. Yet even this late in the evening, the floorspace and stage were still packed. Looking down from my position along the balcony railing, each foot of floorspace was dotted by the heads of fans, while the stage

was dotted with the heads of the hosts, other battlers, and people in the battlers' and the hosts' cliques. The only open space that I could perceive in the venue was the small, spotlit circle on stage where the performers were standing opposite one another, awaiting the start of their battle.

As both batters adjusted the microphone placement on the collars of their catsuits and tested the sound with a series of "can everyone hear me?" and "is this good?" questions, invariably followed by crowd reaction and generally thumbs up to communicate that they wanted the volume increased, the hum of anticipation in the venue had come to a head. In the footage for the YouTube video, these moments are cut out in favor of a direct transition into the battle, but in the space these moments of buildup are critical in setting up the energy that will carry on into the battle itself. Indeed, while battles recorded online are formatted as standalone videos edited to heighten entertainment value as solo works, in-person the battles are much more about the trajectory of the entire event. Energy (or lack thereof) carries over from one battle to another, and thus the order in which the battles occur and the performances of artists in each battle affect the entire night.

While battles are instances of high performance[52]—moments in which participants (i.e. battlers) are more keenly aware of their language use than they ordinarily would be—in battle rap as in street battles, this high performance is juxtaposed with a relaxed-but-rule-governed performance space so that before, during, and after battles, audience members, individuals on stage, and even sometimes the opponent who's not rapping at a given moment, provide visual and audible response to the battler spitting. Battle rap is interactive, and the energy which builds up before the battle very much colors the energy radiating through the space when the battle begins.

[52]Coupeland, N. *Style: Language Variation and Identity.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Once the battlers' microphones were adjusted and the sound guys signaled an all-clear, the hosts quickly confirmed with 40 and Hustle that they were ready to begin. Upon confirmation from both battlers, Vague quieted the crowd so that the battle could begin and the film crew could begin recording the video to be edited and released on YouTube. It always takes a little while for the chatter to come down, especially with such a highly anticipated battle, but after 30 seconds or so, the room was nearly silent. Like the few moments before a classical music concert when the lights go down and the audience silently waits to see the stage lights go up and hear that first percussive attack or that first bow of a violin, in this moment the room's energy transformed from a chattery excitement to a contained anticipation which felt as though it might spill over at any moment—an anticipation made almost tangible in its silently bound state.

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In battles, the rappers themselves often follow many of the same Hip Hop fashion norms of creativity and mixing that fans do, but elevate them in accordance with their quasi-celebrity status. Ms. Hustle is a darker-skinned black woman from New York City with an imposing height. On this night she had long black hair and wore an all-black see-through catsuit with an overlaying pattern that resembled palm fronds. Over of this was a black corset, and the outfit was capped off with black, thigh-high leather boots. Her opponent, 40 B.A.R.R.S., a light-skinned black woman from Boston, was just under a full head shorter than Hustle—the difference was quite noticeable even from my vantage point on the 2nd floor. She wore a waist-length, straight blonde wig along with a cheetah-print catsuit. Both of these women came dressed to impress, to show out visually, as well as lyrically, as the veteran battlers that they are.

As a performer, Ms. Hustle is known for making use of her stature to dominate the stage not only lyrically, but physically as well. Oftentimes she will use claps, stomps, vocalizations, and

other bodily noises to increase the impact of her lyrics. She also often challenges opponents' physical spaces—sometimes remaining right before the precipice of physical contact and sometimes crossing it. Additionally, she uses her voice in myriad ways to emphasize her bars with a gruff timbre, and to weave in and out of different representations and imitations by altering her timbre and tone. This battle was a prime of example of Hustle's impressive onstage performance skills, which oftentimes coincided with various performances of race. 40 B.A.R.R.S., on the other hand, is widely known for her pen and her lyrical ability. Her writing is some of the most complex in battle rap. She regularly weaves two, three, or four layers of meaning in passages that she delivers smoothly with her characteristically lighter timbre. Additionally, her ability to deliver these passages with precision and clarity balances their complexity with understandability. Throughout both rappers' careers, each has worked to round out their skillsets—Hustle with better bars and 40 with better performance. This night was the culmination of those trajectories up to this point, and I knew it would be a classic.

To determine which battler goes first, each battle starts with a coin toss wherein one battler calls heads or tails. If they're correct, they get to decide who goes first and vice versa. For this battle, 40 won the coin toss and decided that Ms. Hustle would go first. Opening bar phrases in rap battles are typically quick, attention-grabbing lyrical passages that have hard-hitting punchlines. Hustle's first bar phrase perfectly encapsulated this stylistic tendency:[53]

1. You was my babe *light clap*
   you used to be cold shorty
2. But now I'm givin' a shot
   I want you to *pose* for me
3. But don't fuck my footage up
   I can't afford you to choke on me

[53]Queenofthering. "MS HUSTLE vs 40 B.A.R.R.S QOTR presented by BABS BUNNY & VAGUE". *YouTube,* 39:52; 00:38. Posted on April 20, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=riziJ5XfPEs

4. Just dust that bitch off
wipe *wipe*
And give me the *old* 40

Despite the increasing intensity from line to line, Hustle delivered these four bars at a relaxed pace, taking about 1-3 seconds of pause between each half of the bar (in battle rap, this is a noticeable amount of time in the middle of a bar). While she rapped these opening lines, she was also physically performing in multiple ways which increased their effectiveness in my eyes as an audience member. Her movements seemed to make the bars feel bigger, which was necessary in a venue with a crowd of this size. Beginning on the opposite side of the five-foot diameter center circle on stage, Hustle moved within a foot of 40's space and back out again three times in these four bars—once over the course of the first two bars, once in the third bar, and the last time more quickly as she spit the line "and give me the old 40." She also physically signed the image of a gun by holding her index and middle fingers straight outward with her thumb raised perpendicular as she spit her 4th bar. This was important because throughout this passage she crafted a single phrase with two meanings—the first was about 40's recent questionable performance at the "Summer Impact" event, and the second made use of another meaning of "40," which is a gun. As I discussed in "The Line" chapter, in-group references are vital components of battle rap and black performance genres more broadly. Taking someone's name and using it against them is a common strategy by which battlers twist their opponents' names to their own purposes. By holding her hand in this way and dusting/wiping it off, she visually corroborated this double meaning for the audience.[54]

[54]Interestingly, Hustle used the term "bitch" to simultaneously refer to 40 B.A.R.R.S. as a human woman and the 40 cal. as an ungendered inanimate object. The linguistic process through which this use became possible is called semantic bleaching—a process through which a term's meaning is broadened over time, often leading to a complete separation from its original meaning (Haiman 1991). For speakers of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), terms like "bitch" and "nigga" are regular used in cases such as this (Jones & Hall, 2015). In this instance, it's unqualified use helped establish AAVE as the normative mode of speech in this space. Thus, this term served

Immediately after Hustle finished the last bar, she was met with impressed "mmmms" and supportive "come on's" and "talk's" from the audience. People all around the room gave her the stank face—a sign of positive recognition in many black performance genres—which shifted quickly into smiles and some laughter. This was a great kick-off to the battle. Hustle continued spitting bars with little pause, using her gruff vocal timbre to amplify her already huge performance even further. That performance shone through once again not even a minute later when Hustle exclaimed:[55]

13. Y'all crazy really y'all said she was dumb fire
14. I been waitin'for'her'to
clap
slide across my plate like the umpire
We cou--
[audience reaction for approx. 2 seconds]
15. We coulda did this in New York but I ain't want bias
16. So I brought 40 on the *rrroad* I'm a drunk driver *clap*

Once more, Hustle decided to use 40's name against her by deploying it homonymously. This time, instead of using 40 to refer to a .40 caliber pistol, she invoked it as the colloquial name of the malt liquor beverage commonly consumed out of brown paper bags in hoods across the U.S. Once again, Hustle also called into question the validity of 40's reputation, especially in relation to her own. New York is home to Queen of the Ring and also Hustle's home, yet she claimed that rather than take 40 on her own turf and risk crowd bias, she wanted to take 40 in a different city—"on the road." As Hustle spit the last bar and the phrase's intensity climaxed, she held up her hands as though she were holding a steering wheel and took three small, stumbled steps back followed by a couple of small steps forward as though she was intoxicated. The audience

two purposes—to linguistically corroborate Hustle's dual meaning and also to reinforce the blackness of this space from onstage. As we will see in the next chapter, this just one of countless ways that battle rappers conduct this reinforcement.

[55]QueenoftheRing. "MS HUSTLE VS 40 B.A.R.R.S", 1:27.

reaction to this bar phrase was even louder than the first, although many of the exclamations and facial expressions were the same.

Throughout the rest of her first round Hustle continued to demonstrate why she is so well known for her performance. At various moments, she embodied various "characters" and ideas by way of vocal and physical representation, once going so far as to mimic 40's voice to speak as her, and then respond in her regular voice. A theme that continued throughout Hustle's round was 40's poor performance at the "Summer Impact" event. At "Summer Impact," 40 participated in a 2-on-2 with battler E-Hart against Jaz the Rapper and O'fficial. At one point in the second round, 40 and E-Hart choked, forgetting their round and needing to stop. They forfeited their third round, deciding not to rap it at all. I had also attended the "Summer Impact" event the summer prior to "Royalty," so I was in the building for 40's poor performance there. This being her first battle since, I was certainly expecting Hustle to use her previous battle as ammunition, but I was also expecting 40 to address the situation lyrically herself—and address it she did.

Like Hustle, 40 opened her first round with a quick, witty opening bar phrase that began with her trademark opening bar and a comedic tone:[56]

58. Rounds one and three straight bars round two's for the personals
59. Yeah this shit's lit for the bitch who's 6' 6" on the vertical I murder hoes
    [audience reaction for approx. 10 seconds; the bar is repeated here for effect]
60. This shit's lit for the bitch who's 6'6" on the vertical I murder hoes but the gag is these bitches braggin' about a choke
61. That shit have me fumin' exhausted by the gas now give me all the smoke I don't wanna hear shit…

My ethnopoetic transcription above—more uniform than those for Hustle's first round—is meant to reflect 40's more contained style of performing her lyrics. While she makes use of inflection

[56]Ibid, 6:18.

and plays with intensity and timbre, 40 places much of her energy into the lyrics themselves. Bar 58 is 40's opening catchphrase—she frequently begins battles with this bar and follows it up with a clever variation specific to her opponent or situation. In this instance, she took the opportunity to make fun of Hustle's notable height. While I found the line a comical flip of a physical characteristic that Hustle frequently uses to her advantage, myself and the rest of the audience also recognized that it was a hard bar in its own right that promised the audience it wouldn't be an easy night for Hustle either. Bar's 60 and 61 introduced a larger theme that carried on into the next bar phrase.

Through these, 40 began to address the poor performance that everyone had been talking about in the months leading up to this event. Bar 60 cleverly employs the homonymous uses of gag and choke at one layer to reference the anatomical functions, and at the other in their more colloquial senses. Gag colloquially means a joke, as in "the gag is," while a choke in battle rap occurs when a rapper forgets their lyrics onstage. She shifted the focus onto herself in the next bar, using a heat/fire metaphor to demonstrate her anger and annoyance that people are still bringing it up to discredit her. Immediately after, 40 followed up with a line that was certainly one of the most impressive of the night. While the first passage was a clever way to begin the round, the second really demonstrated her lyrical ability[57]:

62. I don't wanna hear shit about Summer Impact or what a bitch didn't do
63. Or how y'all niggas is lookin' for a answer like a mystery clue
64. Me and Hart both performed like a pair of mid-tier bitches y'all know that shit to be true
65. But niggas in denial when E gypped y'all outta history too

What seemed like it was going to be 40 simply dispelling of all the "Summer Impact" talk quickly turned into a crafty two-bar conclusion that used semiotic creativity to formulate a connection between E-Hart and E-Gypt. The way in which 40 chose to organizer her last two

[57]Ibid, 6:50.

bars allowed for the "hidden" secondary meaning to unfold as she confidently spit the bars about her and her 2-on-2 teammate at "Summer Impact," E-Hart. In bar 64, 40 set up the idea up by saying that she and Hart acted like a "pair of mid" -tier bitches. The ordering of these morphemes allowed them to be interpreted in their explicit lexical context, but also in relationship to one another as the word "pyramid." Bar 65 contained three more references to this secondary meaning. "Denial" (the Nile) and "E gypped" (Egypt) both functioned similarly to "pair of mid" in that the ways they were placed in the sentence allowed for an interpretation in terms of a larger Egypt idea in addition to their explicit lexical meanings. Finally, 40's reference to "history" doubly served as a reference to the history between her and E-Hart and as a term that confirmed the secondary references to (ancient) Egypt. These two bars were notable for how much complexity 40 was able to fit into two lyrical lines, but for 40 even they were relatively tame. Following this phrase was about 25 seconds of crowd reaction and impressed chatter. Though I was standing by myself, I was just as impressed. I smiled and said to myself, "damn," taken by the sheer lyrical genius that is 40 B.A.R.R.S.

This night, 40's performance was also on point. Likely spurred by the need to compete with a battler as well-known for their performance as Ms. Hustle, 40 took an opportunity toward the 2nd half of her first round to show everyone that she wasn't playing:[58]

92. Uppercut and then double [inaudible] ain't no delayin' with the beats
93. Knuckle up you better duck this punch aimin' for your teeth
94. Get buck then drug money I'll leave you layin'in'the streets
95. Then keep fuckin' hustle up like I can't stay on my feet
stomp *stomp*

Throughout this bar phrase, 40's intensity increased alongside the trajectory of content which culminated with bar 95. During the first bar, 40 moved in closer to Hustle and in the second bar,

[58]Ibid, 10:06.

as she said "knuckle up" she curled her hands into two fists and took a larger, quick step right into Hustle's face. At this point 40 and Hustle appeared to be engaged in a battle for space in which neither would step back. At times their chests actually touched each other, and their faces weren't even two inches away. This moment didn't have the same air of unsurety as moments when two emcees might legitimately fight, however it excited me to see how seriously both emcees were taking this battle and how much both were willing to do to win. The audience's reaction to this bar was the wildest, with not only the "mmms" and stank faces, but legitimate screaming.

Lyrically, this passage was a direct threat to Hustle and her credibility. Like Hustle in her own first round, 40 violated Hustle's name by using it against her. Bars 94 and 95 specifically are built upon direct threats to Ms. Hustle as well as the idea of hustling as making do, finding a way in the streets. When she told Hustle to get buck[59] and drug and that she'll leave her laying in the streets, 40 referred to the physical acts of beating Hustle up; she cemented this meaning by her physical indexing and by the next line's claim that she'll keep "fuckin' hustle (Hustle) up." At the same time, the way in which she included "money" after "drug" brought to light the use of hustling as a practice. Indeed, saying that someone is laying in the streets conjures the idea that their hustle isn't successful; you hustle to get out of the streets—either physically off of the street or more broadly to acquire a better life situation. Thus in 40's concluding bar, when she's fuckin' Hustle up, she isn't just fuckin' Hustle up physically; she's also providing a simile that delegitimized Hustle and Hustle's hustle.

[59]To get "buck" is a colloquial phrase for getting wild or crazy with someone in a challenging way. A prime example is southern rap group Crime Mob's street anthem, "Knuck If You Buck".

Performatively, hearing 40's stomps resonate from the wooden stage, seeing 40 return Hustle's violation of personal space from the first round, and hearing her voice—drastically more aggressive here than elsewhere—built up the tension as 40 spit her bar phrase and as the emcees literally faced off onstage; this tension, was abruptly released with the energetic climax of the second half of bar 95. The rest of 40's first round was filled with a number of other hard-hitting, lyrically complex bar phrases like the ones above. Coming off her "Summer Impact" performance, 40's first round dispelled any doubt in my mind—and likely in anyone else's in the crowd—that she didn't come with her best.

Hustle's second round continued with the same top-tier performance and improved bars that defined her first. Every time she would yell with that gritty vocal timbre or stomp, clap, and snap along with her bars, the crowd would respond with the characteristic crowd responses. Yet when she delivered other bars in a more subdued manner, the crowd still responded in respect of the lyrical content itself.

40's 2nd round also continued her trend from the first—crazy bars with improved performance. In this round, 40 delivered what may have been the scheme of the night. Drawing on then-recent events surrounding rapper T.I. and his daughter, Deyjah, 40 spit six bars with no less than six coded references to the rapper:[60]

208. If I want to do it myself I'll get crazy if she's actin' stupid or behavin' badly
209. Let's break it down to a T, I will check a pussy quick like Deyjah daddy
210. Expeditiously lift it the shit I'm grippin', hit her viciously
211. I'll give her a cool, five, there's no escape from what I'm givin' E
212. She'll get hit by a tip it ain't tiny you understand Hustle?
213. Fuck around and lay your whole fam down for a grand, Hustle

40 set up the scheme in bar 209 by using the common phrase "to a T", followed by the first-person personal pronoun, "I" which, spoken, acts as a reference to the famed Atlanta rapper. In

[60]Ibid, 23:17.

the following four bars, 40 quickly includes reference after reference to the rapper, his family, and his career. In bar 211, 40 dropped the terminal "l" in the word "cool" so that the phrase was pronounced "a coo". Akoo is a clothing brand founded by the rapper. Later in the same bar, "no escape" was a reference to the singing group Xscape, of which T.I.'s wife Tiny was a part. In bar 212, 40 references T.I. and his wife via two of their popular nicknames, "T.I.P" and Tiny. Finally, in bar 213, her final threat of laying Hustle's family down for a grand doubly acts as a reference to T.I.'s 2018 rap competition show titled "Grand Hustle."

Going into the third round, I had every expectation to see another round of lyrical prowess and entertaining performance. Ms. Hustle's third round began in congruence with her style in the first two, but about halfway through it quickly transformed into something more. Hustle spit a bar phrase that seemed normal enough:[61]

291. Let's state facts, after Jaz killed you, it was a long time before we saw shorty
292. I felt bad when you died, poor [pour] 40
293. Why you all on me? This next scheme, was too perfect not to be a part of my bars
294. I'm a organ donor, you know I had to put heart [Hart] on the card

To the surprise of myself and likely most other people in the audience, bar 294—which battle rap fans would normally associate as an introduction to a scheme (Hustle even referred to it as a scheme in 293), introduced a person instead. At this moment, Hustle brought 40's 2-on-2 partner E-Hart onstage to rap alongside Hustle against 40. Realizing this, audience members had clearly mixed reactions. Some clapped and exclaimed "yeah" with excitement, others yelled "oooooo" and "ohhhhh" in a surprised fashion, and of course all started to chatter. Something as atypical as this warranted a lot of audience reaction, and it received it. The audience was chattering and making noises for about 12 seconds afterward. In the midst of all of this, onstage, 40 questioned

[61]Ibid, 30:21.

why Hart was even there, considering she wasn't battling that night. It seemed that she was agitated but not taken off of her game.

Immediately after this, E-Hart spit eight bars by herself, mostly addressing 40's claims that they were equally responsible for their poor performance at "Summer Impact":[62]

295. You said "E gypped them outta history"? How when I slaved the hardest
296. You struggled comin' up with bars, since the day we started
297. We ain't have a prop in the third, you think they retarded?
298. Them interviews you been lied in [bin Ladin], you ain't take the blame for bombin'

299. Bitch you mentionin' my name too often and I'm mad now
300. You was once a cash cow now you just a class clown
301. Yeah you, gave em a rear view, that's the past now
302. Ironic, you wore them shorts, but you left me assed out

Like 40, E-Hart is an emcee who is well-known for her lyrical capabilities. In her first bar she explicitly cited 40's earlier bars about Egypt and E gypped to signal that she was freestyling a rebuttal. As discussed earlier, while freestyle in contemporary battle rap is not necessarily common, it is effectively employed by certain artists to allow them space to address specific claims and statements by their opponents (or in this case, Ms. Hustle's opponent). Her rebuttal not only made a counterclaim against 40's claim that E lied about "Summer Impact", but it did so by continuing the thematic trend that 40 had laid out before. Hence E spit how she "slaved" the hardest, invoking the popular historical understanding of ancient Egypt as a slaveholding society, as well as black America's longstanding foregrounding of the Biblical Exodus narrative as an analog to the black experience in the states.

In bar 298, E made another layered reference meant to counter 40's earlier claims about their two-on-two battle. This time, she cleverly allowed "bombin'" to fill in as both a colloquial term for messing something up and as a term that changes the meaning of "been lied in" from a

[62]Ibid, 31:06.

simple grammatical phrase to an intentional stand-in for (Osama) bin Ladin—the infamous founder of al-Qaeda. While the focus of this thesis is on performances of blackness in contemporary battle rap, it is important to recognize that blackness is far from the only category contended with via performance at these events.

As Hart was spitting, 40 responded conversationally to her claims—itself a practice common to black aesthetic traditions. As we discussed earlier, contemporary battle rap's semi-formal performance environment allows for fans and even opponents to respond in real time during battles. For example, as Hart spit bars 296 and 297, 40 said "you didn't know it, you didn't *know* it". She also frequently turned back to talk to her friends on various occasions while Hart was rapping. Like her responses above, this appeared like a reinforcement of a demeanor of coolness in the face of an act by Hustle that was meant to throw her off.

Hart's solo spitting was short-lived, however, and after the two bar-phrases above, Hustle and Hart started spitting bars back and forth between each other in a more typical, less targeted style. The most impressive part of this round for me was a portion in which Hart and Hustle rapped generally about their impact on battle rap culture, as they are two of the longest-standing female battle rappers:[63]

303. **Hustle:** But I ask how, she ain't even that cold, the gas[?] be different
304. **E:** Back when it was Grindtime she wouldn't last a minute
305. **Hustle:** Think inheritance (**E:** why?) this shit is past [pass] the business
306. **E:** But ain't it January? (**Hustle:** facts) it's time to tax these bitches

307. **E:** Without that EBT shirt you think these bitches couture?
308. **Hustle:** If I ain't do that "swap swap soo" you think these bitches would perform?
309. **E:** That shirt made niggas give us props so you ain't have to fuck for rap
310. **Hustle:** And when I, *swoo* *swoo*, spit them razors out, I show 'em bitches really cut like that

311. **E:** So think about it, this is light work
312. **E:** It wouldn't be an official in the game, **Hustle:** if we ain't get the stripes first

[63]Ibid, 31:58.

In this phrase, Hart and Hustle provided a sort of meta-commentary that included 40 but that had broader salience than just this battle. For example, in bar 304 E-Hart referred back to a defunct battle league that was highly influential in the transition from street battles to contemporary battle rap. In doing so, she was saying that she and Hustle, who were both active during those early days of battle rap, are owed their credit ("taxes") from battlers who weren't around that far back. In specifically saying that 40 wouldn't have lasted a minute, Hart also called upon Grindtime's practice of having one-minute long rounds. As I mentioned before, in contemporary battle rap, rounds in a three-round battle can be as long as 10 minutes after accounting for crowd reaction. Thus, this was also a historical reference to a time when battles were shorter.

In bars 307-312, E and Hustle continued their back and forth spitting about their influence, in more specific terms. These bars demonstrated the practice of self-reference not just at the level of battle rap as a culture, but also at the individual level, with rappers referencing their own work. While fans in the line and in the comment sections of videos regularly referenced battlers' lyrics and practices, onstage battlers weaponize their own lyrics and practices (or those of their opponent or of another battle) in service of coming out on top. In bar 307 E reminded everyone about her iconic prop from her battle against Ms. Hustle (ironically enough), in early 2011. During this battle, in her 3rd round, Hart unzipped the black hoodie she had on to reveal a black t-shirt printed with a large scan of Hustle's EBT card. This battle was notable not only because it was the first time two female emcees battled on URL, but also because of the notable incorporation of this shirt as a prop. Hart's next bar, bar 309, also referenced the shirt, stating that it made niggas give them (as women) props—credit—while subtly highlighting how the shirt itself was a prop.

In bar 308 Hustle likewise called upon her own work, highlighting her skills as a performer. The "swap swap soo" she mentions is an onomatopoeic index of spitting a razor blade out of one's mouth and cutting someone. This practice is familiar to those embedded in the often violent realities of street life, but in terms of battle rap it has become a trademark part of Hustle's overall robust performance toolkit. Here she explicitly stated that it's *because* of her "swap swap soo," as well as her performance in general, that other ladies were able to embody big performance personas. In bar 310 she returned to the idea, using it to reinforce her legitimacy as a rapper. While bar 308 referenced the "swap swap soo" as a rhetorical-performative device, in bar 310 she referenced the same practice by performing the actual process instead of the lexicalized onomatopoeic version. Explosively blowing out air in two puffs while simultaneously moving her hands toward her mouth as though she was grabbing the razors, Hustle made it clear that despite bar 308's rhetorical-performative reference, she's actually *about* the action.

After four more bars split between the two emcees, Hart receded back into the group of people onstage and Hustle finished her round. This moment turned this battle from a classic something even more. These two black women took the stage together to recognize their own roles in the very battle rap culture and space that we stood in on that day. Although battlers in one-on-ones have brought out third parties various times before, there is always still a unique dynamic between three battlers in a battle that should, by definition, contain two.

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The end of a battle is usually marked by applause and oftentimes a summary recognition of both battlers by the hosts. At the end of this battle, the circle in which the two emcees stood quickly collapsed as their friends and the hosts congratulated them, patting them on the back,

hugging them, and verbally recognizing their work. Smack stepped to the front of the stage, telling the audience to "give it up for 40, give it up for Hustle, URLTv.tv!". Behind him, 40 and Hustle shared an amicable embrace, customary at Queen of the Ring Battles when battlers don't harbor real animosity toward one another.

The end of most battles on the day of a battle rap event is a time to reset and prepare for the next battle, which can come in as little as a few minutes or as many as 30 minutes to an hour later. The end of the last battle of the night, however, generally leaves a feeling of exhausted relief. It was now almost midnight and I had been on my feet since noon. As much as battle rap events are fun, they are also marathons of both mental engagement, with complex lyrical displays, and physical engagement, with a bombardment of sensory stimuli—the pressure of the floor against your feet as the day goes on, the ever-present cloud of marijuana and tobacco smoke in a confined space, the constant micro-adjustments one has to make to remain comfortable while standing but also be able to see around other people's shifting bodies, and the drone of chatter, loud music, and the voices of mic'd up battlers. By the end of a long day in this physically and culturally insular space, stepping back outside into the cool night is a blast back into the real world. It's simultaneously a sensory relief and a realization that as a fan, until the next event, your engagement with battle rap will transition back to being primarily online. As I walked back from the entrance of the venue to the end of the alley and made a left back down the wide brick sidewalk toward my car, a sense of tired reflection weighed on my mind. It never fails to impress me how, for the span of an event, I was able to help contribute to and exist in what felt like an entirely insular, black-led, black-centered other world. Being in this space as a biracial man, it felt like my presence, my outfit, my laughter and surprise at lyrics, and every

other facet of my being in the space helped contribute to the complex, antiessentialist blackness that is a collective byproduct of every participant at a battle rap event.

Each battle is unique with performative singularities that arise out of the styles of each performer, the relationship between the two, the energy of the crowd, the space of the venue, and relevant current events. Moving on from a primarily performance-focused analysis of 40 B.A.R.R.S. vs Ms. Hustle, in my concluding chapter I expand outward to consider the battle rap world more broadly. As we saw in some of the examples from this chapter, battle rappers perform race—and specifically blackness—through bodily performance, language use, and discursive topics. In chapter four, I will analyze some of the most frequent occurrences of black performance on the battle rap stage by dividing the chapter into themes of linguistic performances; references to black practices, experiences, and geographies; and direct articulation of prominent black figures—all as ways in which battle rappers perform and theorize blackness in themselves and their opponents.

CHAPTER 4: LYRICAL CONSTRUCTIONS

In this fourth chapter, I depart from the narrative structure of the preceding chapters to analyze and contextualize some of the more frequent performances of blackness that I've found in battle rap lyrics across various battles. Battlers perform blackness through the lyrics they spit, referring to shared knowledge like racialized practices, people, and understandings of the world, some examples of which I discussed in Chapters 1, 2, and 3. I have chosen to organize my lyrical analysis into six thematic subsections, to highlight some of the most common ways in which battle rappers perform blackness in both themselves and their opponents—often simultaneously.

I will begin by looking at examples when emcees explicitly articulate the category of blackness during their rounds. Because of the antiessentialist nature of blackness in the space, direct articulations of blackness usually appear as references to skin tone gradations. The second section will look at how battle rappers hyperperform linguistic distinctions in opponents to highlight differences that are understandable to battle rap participants within the broader category of African American Vernacular English. The third section will analyze ways that battle rappers use black history in their rounds—often as ways of commenting on present conditions or denigrating a black opponent. In this I conceptualize history broadly—with some events occurring as a few months ago and other hundreds of years ago. The fourth section will look at racialized conceptions of place. By this, I mean instances when battlers take practices associated with blackness in battle rap spaces—street life, sex and sexuality, aesthetics, etc.—and correlate them with either another battler's or their own neighborhood, city, state, or region.

The final two sections will focus on references to street life practices and iconic black figures, respectively, that are understood as being representative or referential of blackness. As I discussed in "The Line," certain practices in battle rap spaces constitute the space as a qualitatively black one. Many more practices associated with various ways of being black in the U.S. are used by battle rappers in positive and negative ways to comment on themselves and their opponents.

Alim, Lee, and Carris, in their research on performances of blackness in street battles, found that while blackness was the dominant racial category, a specific *kind* of blackness dominated in these battles: a masculine, heterosexual, street blackness. [64] Much of the popular media portrayals of rap would corroborate this idea of a masculine, heterosexual, idyllic street figure. My findings about contemporary battle rap, however, suggest some unique complication of this role in a subgenre of rap that is already unique in so many ways.

While heterosexual male blackness is still dominant overall in the world of battle rap, there are many significant spaces in which this normativity is regularly decentered. For example, at Queen of the Ring, the most prominent all-female battle league, black womanhood is the dominant category and topics which revolve around it are more prominent. Not only that, but as a space of black womanhood, Queen of the Ring is also a more openly queer space, inviting weaponized discourse between various sexual orientations and gender presentations. Perhaps 40 B.A.R.R.S. said it best in her battle vs prominent male battler Daylyt[65]:

1. But can I hold you nigga? Let me console you nigga
2. At Queen of the Ring gay shit we condone my nigga
3. [inaudible] them feelings you wanna control my nigga
4. Come up out the closet Day that's just the place for clothes my nigga

[64]Alim, H. Samy, Lee, J., and Carris, L. Mason. 2010. "'Short Fried-Rice-Eating Chinese MCs'" 120.

[65]QueenoftheRing. "Queen of the Ring 40 B.A.R.R.S. vs DAYLYT". *Youtube,* 38:59, 30:33. Posted on April 12, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-myvQ7kzRic

5. We got hustlers, baby mommas, bitches on welfare
6. Graduates, scholars, who the hell cares?
7. If you stuck up, or humble; from the burbs, or the jungle
8. Long as once you in this ring D, you, ready to rumble

9. This redemption from deception, free yourself
10. Queen of the Ring we don't care you could be yourself

While 40's tone throughout this passage was sarcastic—indicating that she was intentionally toying with the idea of Daylyt's sexuality—the content of the section touches on a real openness seen in Queen of the Ring, unseen to this degree elsewhere in the battle rap world. That is, while there are surely still moments where certain social categories and experiences are foregrounded, overall there is a sort of social leveling that goes on onstage wherein individuals can employ any of their own identities and the identities of their opponents in service of the battle at hand. While everything is put on the stage for ridicule and attack, there also appears to be an interesting equalizing effect that I will touch on in my own discourse analysis below. In spite of the normativity of heterosexual masculine street blackness, contemporary battle rap—and specifically female battle rap, with the increased complexity afforded by the forethought of pre-written rounds—is a space where any aspect of a person's being—including their race and sexuality—can be and is weaponized. In a sense, if everything is up for grabs, it becomes harder for individual identities to maintain dominance onstage. As we saw in the 40 vs Hustle battle when 40 challenged Hustle's stature in her opening bar phrase, paradigms of dominance in one moment can be flipped and become weapons for denigration in the next. As we will see in the remainder of the chapter, blackness is one of the categories in which this flipping of paradigms commonly happens; however, the blacknesses presented in battle rap stages are already multifarious, and the forum for critiquing and reinforcing these multifarious ideas in a rappers'

rounds is what allows battle rap to be in constant contention with blackness as an antiessentialist category.

Battle rappers often perform positive ideas of blackness in themselves and negative ideas in their opponents simultaneously onstage. Thus, the practice can be read in terms of larger academic conversation about performing the self and other in which performance spaces become sites of identity formation both within and between groups.[66] Battle rappers perform blackness in themselves and their opponents in myriad ways—through their lyrics, practices, and bodily performances onstage. The ideas about blackness that are performed onstage are anything but clean or consistent. They often contrast with one other—sometimes even within a battle rappers' own round—and they often serve the purpose of winning the battle as much as they express a rapper's true feelings. Oftentimes rappers place value judgements on certain actions or ways of living to either implicitly or explicitly state that there are more and less desirable ways of being black. The import of all these messages, however, is not in their objectivity or validity, but in their free expression on the battle rap stage. The conflictual messages about, the play with, and the working and reworking of blackness serve to deconstruct the common idea of blackness as a monolith, and instead, allow for an antiessentialist understanding of blackness that battle rappers live very publicly as they face-off lyrically and physically. The messages themselves, like the blackness(es) they refer to are rarely isolated. For organizational purposes I've divided them into six sections on explicit articulation of blackness, language, history, geography, street life, and iconic figures, but in practice they discursively and experientially intersect with one another to create networks of overlapping and departing ways of understanding the world.

[66]Carlson, M. "Performing the Self". *Modern Drama* 39, no. 4 (1996) 599-608.; Pennycook, A. "Global Englishes, Rip Slime and Performativity". *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 7, no. 4 (2003) 513-533.; Rampton, B. Introduction. Theme issue "Styling the Other" *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 3, no. 4 (1999) 421-427.

Explicit Articulation

Direct articulations of blackness between black emcees often play out through references to skin-tones and the folk characterizations that accompany them. Perceptions of different skin-color gradients are highlighted on the battle rap stage, a practice that can be seen as promoting problematic colorist tenets. Globally, color gradation is an often-weaponized reality among black and brown communities. Despite any solidarity of being black in a black community, it is also true that the less phenotypically black you look, i.e. the lighter you look, the more favorable you will be looked upon by those in powerful in social systems dominated by whiteness, for your proximity to it. At the same time, however, battle rap's intense competition also allows battlers to challenge and subvert the normal light skin-dark skin power differential, as we will see in the "Historical Markers" section below.

For an example of skin-tone referencing, we can turn to a 2012 battle in which 40 called out Star Smilez as, "a bald-head scallywag with shit-colored skintone."[67] As a light-skinned biracial man, I can confidently say that the difference in skin tone between the two of these women is minimal. Both are what would be considered lighter-skinned black women. Yet as we saw in the second chapter's toast example, blackness is rarely treated in simple ways and it is rarely placed on a consistent, unquestioned pedestal. The laughs that 40's line received point to how otherizing in battles-as-black-spaces, occurs *within* the category of blackness, which in its own way allows for broader conceptualizations of what blackness is. Like when Shine rejected the captain's wife by making reference to her skin tone, 40 B.A.R.R.S. provided an oppositional perspective. While she by no means suggested that all darker-skinned individuals are shit-colored, on a personal level she wielded her own slightly lighter skin tone as a benefit.

[67]Queenofthering. "BABS BUNNY & VAGUE 'QUEEN OF THE RING' 40 B.A.R.R.S. vs STAR SMILEZ W.T.T." *Youtube.* 20:45, 20:18. Posted on March 1, 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BegkUQ7h_SE

Alternatively, darker-skinned battlers often call out lighter-skinned performers in ways that push back against a simple unidirectional rendering of colorism on the battle rap stage. As we will see in the "Historical Markers" section below, Ms. Murk's deployment of the field nigga-house nigga dichotomy against ligher-skinned opponent Phara Funeral is a prime example of this paradigm flipping. She was able to wield her own struggles and the group understanding of the historically greater struggles of darker-skinned individuals in the black community as a weapon to tear down her ligher-skinned opponent while simultaneously boosting herself.

Language Markers

The battle rap world is a space in which blackness is lived explicitly in as many ways as there are black people in the space to live it. While individual idiosyncrasies in how rappers live blackness are frequently called out and played up so that an emcee can discredit their opponent, individual choices are hardly the only ways in which one's blackness can be critiqued onstage. There are also various micro-social ways, the very existence of which highlights the unique treatment of blackness in battle rap spaces, in which black individuals are divided within the category of blackness. These include regional and racialized variations of the normative African American Vernacular English (AAVE), racialized conceptualizations of place (as I mentioned briefly in the first chapter), affiliations with certain institutions, etc. In this section I will explore examples of how language is used to perform the black other in battle rap.

One particularly well-represented phonological variation, characteristic of certain regional varieties of AAVE, is the /u/-fronting heard most commonly and most dramatically from Baltimore rappers.[68] This phonological characteristic often plays a recognizable role when Baltimore emcees rap. When non-Baltimore emcees imitate this characteristic, it often provides

[68]/u:/-fronting is a phonological process by which the phoneme /u/--typically spoken in the back of the mouth, is brought forward in speech.

a moment of comic relief mid-battle, while doing the work of continuing to complicate oversimplified notions of blackness (in this case, black speech). Battle rapper Classy comically demonstrated this against Baltimore-based opponent Hazzy during their 2014 battle on Queen of the Ring:[69]

1. So how B-more gon feel when you looooose?
2. You can hit these niggas wit a U-Haul truck and they won't be moooved
3. I ain't Blood, but big B's rule
4. And I keep the tool tucked for bitches, that wanna act a fool

By extending the length of the vowel in her pronunciation of 'lose' and 'move', Classy hyperbolically performed a real linguistic distinction between black people from different locations that is significant in battle rap spaces. After the first line, the crowd and the group of individuals onstage broke out laughing and clapping, recognizing the hilarity in this hyperimitation. It points to the shared place-based conceptualization that exists in the space—one that can be called upon by imitating a characteristic linguistic variation.

Another battler whose language use subjects them to comedic scrutiny is 40 B.A.R.R.S., the Boston native. Her opponents often imitate her generally more relaxed-sounding way of speaking. In a 2013 battle, Phara Funeral went so far as to claim that 40's accent was really a cheap way of making her lyrics sound more complex than they are through rhyming. In this case too, the imitation was hyperbolized for performance effect, yet it played on a real linguistic distinction based on a perceived difference between speakers of AAVE:[70]

1. But every battle she rap about Mexicans, and that shit is a damn shame

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[69]Queenofthering. "BABS BUNNY & VAGUE present QOTR CLOSE ROOM BATTLE HAZZY vs CLASSY". *Youtube.* 20:06, 15:10. Posted on August 18, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qP069ZYc6kQ&list=PL6lifBsW1HyXout3i14VZ3kHt7h_m1h0t&index=54&t=0s

[70]QueenoftheRing. "BABS BUNNY & VAGUE presents QUEEN OF THE RING 40 B.A.R.R.S. vs PHARA FUNERAL". *Youtube.* 28:46, 18:57. Posted on March 23, 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tTknAiU1BiU.

2. She don't got bars she foolin' y'all she just make sure every endin' of every word sound the damn same

3. She say shit like: all my homies loco, only hablo españo
4. When it's time to ride it's Juan, Pablo, and Paco
5. At your casa, pronto, big guns the shells are tacos
6. All my niggas dressed to kill, Desperado

Phara exaggeratedly shifted many of the vowels in this passage to reflect the particular of Boston English, and also to claim that 40's complex bars really aren't that complex at all. For instance, she dropped the terminal /l/ from what would have been "Español" in order to create a sonic sameness with "loco" and "hablo." She also replaced many other vowels with a typically Boston-sounding open-back [ɒ] so that, for example [raɪd] shifted to [rɒɪd], [wɑn] shifted to [wɒn], and [dɛspəˈrɑdoʊ] shifted to [dɛspəˈrɒdoʊ] and thus were more consistent with one another. As Phara spit the phrase audience members affirmed her assertion by exclaiming "uh-huh" and "right!" throughout. Though exaggerated, this performance of otherness to a real, noticed distinction *within* AAVE that provides a salient example of the ways in which battle rappers and audience members conceptualize blackness in complex ways.

In addition to linguistic distinctions, distinctions in how people live their blackness via practices associated with black experiences are also ways in which battle rappers perform others onstage.

Historical Markers

Battle rappers often engage with histories relevant to specific black communities or black people in the United States as a whole. Their bars about a moment in history serve as a snapshot and marker of their own historical awareness, while often (though not always) doubling as offensive moves against their opponent onstage. Within this frame, references to slavery, the most profound event to impact black people globally, are common in battle rappers' rounds—as

performances of their own racialized knowledge and as a way of making negative analogies about their opponents. Yet these references, far from academic treatises on the topic, are used in varied ways as tools for competition, sometimes critically examined, sometimes questioned, or sometimes used as a metaphor for a contemporary person, event, or situation. Even the 40 vs. Hustle battle, analyzed in detail above, included a reference to slavery. In Hustle's first round she made a passing reference to 40's battle record that employed a slavery reference:[71]

1. You ain't even worthy of the shit, your whole career worked to get me, so extra
2. Slavin' get whipped back to back, they shoulda let O press her

These two short bars reference an entire history of violence against black bodies at the hands of powerful colonial forces and white individuals. Simultaneously, they are situated in the now—in the moment on stage where two talented black creators are facing off using their creativity as weapons against one another. Hustle used the colloquial meanings of the terms "whipped" and "press" to construct a bar phrase which doubly referenced all of the alleged work 40 had to go through to even get this battle, while also referencing how 40 has been getting beat (literally and figuratively) over and over again. The bars were also a coded reference to another prominent black woman in the battle rap world—coded because without knowledge of battle rap and its key players, a listener wouldn't know that O is a nickname for rapper O'fficial. As I mentioned in chapter 2, O'fficial was part of the two-on-two team who faced off against 40 at "Summer Impact," and therefore referencing 40 getting beat back to back (at "Summer Impact" and according to Hustle, now at "Royalty") made use of this fact. The organization of the second bar with "O" coming directly before "press," means that in performance, the line could also easily be heard as "oppress," which tied together the slavery subtext. Thus, the second bar did double

[71]QueenoftheRing. "MS HUSTLE VS 40 B.A.R.R.S", 3:20.

work in referencing this prominent black historical period while also belittling her opponent in the present.

Another common trope discursively explored through slavery references are specific dimensions of enslavement. For example, the figures of a "house nigga" as a privileged light-skinned black person and a "field nigga" as a hardworking dark-skinned black person without that same privilege are often invoked in battles as analogies for one's opponent. These points add another layer to the antiessentialist blackness constructed in battle rap spaces, crafting distinctions based upon differences in color gradation as we saw in the first section on explicit articulations of blackness. As in toast-telling, anxieties about relationships *within* the black community play out discursively in the lyrics performed onstage; unlike in toasts, however, in contemporary battle rap, battlers from both sides of a paradigm can speak back on the issue:[72]

1. Cuz that thug life, you know nuttin' about nigga
2. All you got, is reputation and clout nigga
3. Real bitches like me come rare as the drought nigga
4. And I just thought I'd tear you light-skins out, you fuckin' house nigga

Even though the fourth bar is relatively simple, its use in this space invokes centuries of anxieties about certain black people's physical proximity to whiteness that has typically translated to a relatively more favorable perception by white people themselves. In this instance Murk, a dark-skinned female, not only references this as a historical fact, but flips the paradigm so that now she, as a dark-skinned woman, is on the attack sussing out all of the light-skins.

The other side of this paradigm was displayed when Jada Raye, a lighter-skinned black woman, battled Couture, a darker-skinned black woman, at Queen of the Ring's "Panic Room" event in 2012:

1. Her name is Couture, but don't look like she came off Melrose

[72]Queenofthering. "PHARA FUNERAL vs MS MURK QOTR presented by BABS BUNNY & VAGUE". *Youtube.* 22:51, 17:41. Posted on August 6, 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z9PNc9L3sf0

2. Bitch! You got a black history face, you look like you came off the underground railroad!

Jada Raye's invocation of a "black history face" conjures an idea of an aged, weary, and likely dark-skinned historical figure. While comical and not explicitly calling out Couture's skin color, the phrase can certainly be read as a tactic to use Couture's darker skin color to associate her with a less desirable aesthetic in this moment of the battle. It's not only that Couture is dark-skinned, but according to Jada Raye she is dark-skinned and *ugly*. Playing off of Couture's name, Jada says that Couture isn't actually Couture, invoking the popular Melrose Ave. in Los Angeles. Rather, she is the opposite of the lavish luxury that one would think of on Melrose, she's ugly in such a way that she appears "historical." "Black history face" is not a phrase that I've heard used outside of this battle; however, because of the shared knowledge of black history between participants in the battle rap space, as well as an understanding about how battle rappers craftily manipulate words and their meanings, entirely novel phrases like this can be spit by rappers and understood by the audience in the moment of their recitation.

While references to slavery are relatively commonplace, they are far from the only references to events or histories in battle rap verses. Deisel—a well-known battler from Richmond, VA—demonstrated this aptly when she battled Casey Jay, a battler from Texas, in 2014:[73]

1. What you think you hard? Cuz you hangin' wit niggas?
2. I'm from the capital Confederates, they hangin' niggas
3. I never been no pussy, I never been no witness
4. I'm a open book but a couple pages missin'

5. I'm not a star? Den somebody lied
6. You was taught to wish on a shootin' star? Well gone try it
7. Cuz I could you care who you with
8. You cross that line you be the first dyin' from the Emmitt Smith

9. You Texans don't want to see our boys

[73]Queenofthering. "BABS BUNNY & VAGUE QUEEN OF THE RING DEISEL vs CASEY JAY". *Youtube.* 19:09, 8:50. Posted on November 19, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H2iv9O6gcFY&t=527s

10. Come to the projects then hear that loud noise
11. For real, you should be thankin' FEMA
12. Cuz the real reason it's real niggas in Texas because of Katrina

This 12-bar phrase actually moves between two different historical references in its short duration. In the first four bars, Deisel emphasized the antagonism between herself and Casey Jay by calling upon the historical reality of her hometown—Richmond. While, according to Deisel Casey thinks she's hard because she hangs with street dudes, that has nothing on growing up in the capital of the Confederacy. This is perhaps even more salient in the current moment six years after the battle, when individuals who still associate themselves with that Confederacy and its ideologies are fighting hard to keep hold of that long-lost power. Following up on this, in the 5-8th bars she made a quick reference to football player Emmitt Smith, a reference that, as we will see later, employs another frequently used performance-of-blackness strategy in battle rap. Her final four bars returned to the Texas-Virginia opposition seen throughout the rest of the phrase. This time, Deisel made use of a more contemporary historical reference—Hurricane Katrina—from the lens of black street lives.

It is fairly common knowledge that Hurricane Katrina disproportionately impacted African American communities when it made landfall in August 2005, and that subsequent news coverage, federal aid, and legislation served to reify these everyday ruptures experienced by black people in the area. One study conducted by Gabe et. al. stated that "an estimated 272,000 black people were displaced by flooding or damage, accounting for 73% of the population affected by the storm in [Orleans] parish."[74] While this study focused on the social impacts in terms of broader U.S. society, there is an underside of lived experience known to black

[74]Gabe, T., G. Falk, M. McCarty, and V. W. Mason. 2005. "Hurricane Katrina: Social-Demographic Characteristics of Impacted Areas" *Congressional Research Service Report for Congress.* The Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Americans—particularly those involved in the street life. Along with the displacement of black Americans from New Orleans to other southern population centers—especially Houston, Texas—was a displacement of local alternative economic forces, including New Orleans gangs. As a result, the local streets of New Orleans, Houston, and other southern cities were forced into quick contact, and sometimes conflict.

In her final four bars Deisel used this reality as way of further discrediting Casey Jay by discrediting her home state. Here we can see the coalescence of both a historical event, and racial understandings of geographical locations, which I will discuss in the next section. According to Deisel, the only reason that there are real niggas in Texas today (or rather, in 2014 when the battle happened), was because of this historical population shift. Rather than a simple displacement of people rendered flat by statistics, in this moment Deisel captured the dynamism of the lived experience of those in the street life during this turbulent time, while also using that dynamism to make a claim against the validity of her opponent.

In these ways and others, battle rappers employ black history from various moments as a topic to comment on contemporary conditions of black people and to make comparisons with themselves or their opponents. As was previewed in Deisel's bar phrase to Casey Jay, historical references in battle rap often include invocations of place and the practices of blackness associated with them; in making space-based references, battle rappers construct a racialized understanding of geography.

Geographical Markers

In the "Language Markers" section we saw a local linguistic variation of AAVE—Baltimore /u/-fronting—as the basis for jokes about emcees from the city. Place-based distinctions extend far beyond linguistic particularities of certain locales. Jokes about Baltimore

emcees also stem from Baltimore's relative distance from other major northeastern cities—specifically New York, where many battle rap events are held. Placed-based jokes, as well as place-based denigrations, are racialized in battle rap because of the ways in which battlers intentionally correlate place with racialized practices and attributes like street life, sex and sexuality, and rap skill. Philly rapper Zan has brought up these Baltimore-based jokes and critiques in her sparring session against Ko Ko Kakez in a 2012 battle:[75]

1. And for the record, arm reach is my space
2. If you get in it, bitch Ima punch you in your face

3. That's my word, B, all you Baltimore bitches is boring
4. Hazzy suckin' dick, you eatin' pussy, you bitches is whore-y
5. I came here to kill shit, end of story

Her bars were met with jovial laughter from the crowd, for which these place-based ideas are nothing new. The confluence of geography-based distinctions, hypersexual activities as a negative demonstration of blackness, and sexual orientation, came together in Zan's bars to beat her opponent by characterizing "Baltimore bitches" as an undesirable subset of the battle rap community. Zan suggests that they are whore-y not only in the traditional heteronormative mode, but also in a more robust way that wraps Ko Ko's bisexual or homosexual orientation into the heteronormative category of "whore". This reflects the unique makeup of Queen of the Ring discussed earlier in this chapter. The third bar also contains a critique of Baltimore battlers' rapping skills, when Zan calls the "Baltimore bitches" boring.

[75]Queenofthering. "BABS BUNNY & VAGUE QOTR SPARRING SESSION: ZAN vs KO KO KAKEZ". *Youtube.* 15:24, 3:27. Posted on September 5, 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Leterp9OjyE

Brooklyn battler Jai Smoove took an even more complex shot at Baltimore battlers when she battled another Baltimore-based emcee, Hazzy, whose name was mentioned by Zan in the previous example:[76]

1. Real recognize real, so I'd like to take this time out real quick
2. To thank Babs, for makin' me waste bars on this borin' bitch
3. I mean I got the call you wanted me, and I knew it was a setup
4. So I'm expectin' props, personals, pictures the whole getup

5. So if that's what you came with fuck you, and your city too
6. I mean, hear me out Baltimore, I'm just goin' off how these bitches is representin' you

7. Cuz Ms. Pak, you not a star, and the world already witnessed that
8. Ms. Queen's dumb ass got 3-0'd the next day and we seen Dwella handle that
9. Ko Ko Kakez, you ass, and you only here cuz that shit is fat
10. So Hazzy, ain't gas expensive? Why the fuck y'all keep comin' back?

11. Cuz you keep comin' back only just to get bodied more
12. Potent pussy bitch, maybe you should wash your body more
13. Strong punchlines you'll feel them jabs hit your body more
14. I'ma body you then my [inaudible] gon drag your body more then throw you in a bag then send that bag back to Bodymore

This passage is layered with multiple references to Baltimore and Baltimore-based emcees that collectively add to a racialized characterization of the city. Jai began the phrase in bar 2 by referencing the same understanding of Baltimore emcees that Zan did, that they're boring and that as a result, she expected her opponent to use all kinds of tactics to try to win. By bar 5 she had already said "fuck Baltimore," though interestingly she qualified the statement by saying that she was just "going off" of how the Baltimore battlers were representing their city. This demonstrated an even more specified characterization of place, where the locale wasn't being racialized because of all of its black residents, but because of the Baltimore battle rappers specifically.

[76]Queenofthering. "BABS BUNNY & VAGUE presents QOTR SPARRING SESSION JAI SMOOVE vs HAZZY" *Youtube.* 20:19, 5:01. Posted on October 6th, 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSYQGRHoDg8

In bars 7-10, she called out four Baltimore battlers by stage name, proclaiming why each contributes to this negative depiction of Baltimore. At the end of bar 10, Jai brought Baltimore's real distance from NYC into play as a reason to ask her opponent Hazzy why the group of Baltimore emcees even bothers participating at Queen of the Ring. Bars 11-14 continued to focus on Baltimore, but switched from Jai discussing the Baltimore emcees' lack of credibility to using Baltimore's nickname—Bodymore—against her Baltimore-based opponent. In the last three of these bars she uses a verb ("wash"; "hit"; "drag") and the possessive pronoun "your," followed immediately by the words "body more," to index this nickname while also placing Hazzy as the subject of Jai's threats and suggestions. In the final half of bar 14 which is notably longer that the other three bars, Jai caps off the phrase by explicitly saying "Bodymore" fully for the first and last time.

While Baltimore and its emcees are often the subject of critique, it isn't the only place that comes to be racially characterized in battle rap. Even Hip Hop's home, New York City, is not exempt from the racialized, place-based discursive critiques. In her 2012 battle against Tori Doe, 40 B.A.R.R.S. specifically targeted Harlem, the neighborhood from which Doe hails, yet she quickly introduced the phrase by giving props to her own city of Boston:[77]

1. I could hit this bitch like Po did Rich
2. Only difference I'm from Boston where my dogs don't snitch

Setting up Boston as a place in which street life is dominant over loyalty to the justice system allowed her to set up Harlem in contradistinction a mere four bars later:[78]

3. Harlem home to the hustlers, but it's a residence for the rats
4. I'm spittin' rhymes but these lines come wit evidence and facts
5. We know Nickie, Franky, Alpo the top three

[77]Queenofthering. "BABS BUNNY & VAGUE presents QUEEN OF THE RING 40 B.A.R.R.S. vs TORI DOE". *Youtube.* 24:27, 20:11. Posted on October 13, 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M4tsRRAih48

[78]Ibid, 20:28.

6. I'm lyin' then I'm flyin' please, somebody stop me
7. Her homies getting' heated they gon' probably wanna pop me
8. But it's cool Tori came from Harlem, she gon tell who shot me

Understanding Harlem's complex history as a hub of black creativity and black street life in the United States, 40 discursively constructed Harlem as a complex place with both Hustlers and rats (individuals who cooperate with the police). Thus, despite its notoriety for black America, 40 insinuated that people like Tori represent another side of the Harlem life. Interestingly, while 40's bars here denigrated Harlem generally, they were embedded in an even larger scheme based on *infamous* Harlem hustlers who became federal informants (Nicky Barnes, Frank Lucas, and Alpo Martinez), which was also part of a performance of her own blackness. While she denigrated her opponent's association with the rat side of Harlem, she simultaneously demonstrated her own knowledge of these individuals and their role in a complex black Harlemworld that was at its peak in the 20th century.[79]

Street Life

For Hip Hop Culture, street life has long been a key site of creativity, distinguished from the formal white-dominated knowledge spaces of academia and high culture. Even today, association with street life remains the dominant metric of legitimacy. Rappers often perform their own blackness positively by claiming connections to practices associated with the streets.

However, street life's role as the primary metric of validity in contemporary battle rap—though pervasive—is at times shaky. This has been particularly true over the past decade, as an increasing number of battlers have entered the scene, thus increasing the diversity of the field. Street life is no longer the uncontested site of creativity, but rather, is itself able to be praised *and*

[79]For more on the idea of Harlemworld, see: Jackson (2001) *Harlemworld: Doing Race and Class in Contemporary Black America.*

called into question on the battle rap stage—both in a battler's efforts to beat their opponent. In performing the blackness of opponents, rappers now often bring up negatives associated with street life to invalidate their opponents' claims to legitimacy because of it.

The 2014 Cee the Boss vs Deisel battle, for instance, included no less than eight reference to drugs, invoking using them,[80] preparing them,[81] and distributing them.[82] For example, Cee used Deisel's name, which is also the name of a strain of high quality weed, to threaten her by calling upon common terms related to the drug (bolded in the transcription below):[83]

1. You know how they say it hurt to kill someone you love?
2. Well this gon hurt me to the core cuz this bitch is a dub

3. Nah, I love Deisel I'm **reggie**, I **cut Deisel**
4. But if Cee **roll up** it's a **wrap**, fuck Deisel
5. You buff Deisel? Look at these guns, I buck Deisel
6. Take a quarter [inaudible] off it's nothin' to **puff Deisel**
7. You tough Deisel? Jump if you want, I spin Deisel
8. Use sex, three rounds triple X, I vin Deisel

Each of the bolded terms refers in some way to both Deisel as Cee's opponent and Deisel as the high-quality strain of weed. For example, when Cee says that she's reggie, she'll cut Deisel, at one level she's threatening to physically cut Deisel, while at another she's talking about cutting a higher quality strain of marijuana with reggie, a term for lower quality weed, to make the sale more profitable for the seller. By displaying this knowledge onstage, which is itself understood as embedded within the larger context of black street life, Cee worked to legitimize her own blackness through this street knowledge. While all of these activities are illegal by mainstream

[80]Queenofthering. "Cee the Boss vs Deisel". 3:44, 9:51, 12:47, 15:21.

[81]Ibid. 10:35, 18:42.

[82]Ibid., 8:40.

[83]Ibid., 9:43.

U.S. standards, for rappers to demonstrate their knowledge about drugs at various stages of processing and consumption speaks to a lived experience with the black-driven street life that we've discussed throughout this thesis.

Similarly, in the 40 B.A.R.R.S. vs Star Smilez battle, Star professed in no uncertain terms and on more than one occasion that she is affiliated with the Bloods, a notorious street gang.[84] What's more, while doing so, she visually indexed her involvement with the group by throwing up her Blood set—the hand sign that refers to a particular group within the Blood organization. In the context of a battle rap verse, affiliations like this are a way to call upon legitimacy by way of the kind of street blackness that pervades—though less monolithically—in contemporary battle rap today.

Several battlers claim affiliation to gangs; however, there is increasing pushback between battlers about claims of legitimacy by way of gang affiliations. More battlers today are questioning these claims as a way of delegitimizing opponents in battles, but the practice also serves to complicate the broader notion that the more *street* a rapper is, the better.

Phara Funeral is another notable battler who claims affiliation with the Bloods; when she battled 40 B.A.R.R.S., 40 challenged her association with the gang and the negative impact it could have. There is a constant push and pull between the glorification of street activities, and the abandonment or avoidance of them. 40 B.A.R.R.S. is verbally opposed to gang banging, outright calling out its negative influence:[85]

1. I put a beam on your team, your favorite color gon dot the mob
2. I don't gang bang dirty bitch but I'll drop a slob

[84]Queenofthering. "40 B.A.R.R.S. vs STAR SMILEZ". 9:43, 9:48, 16:42.
[85]Queenofthering. "40 B.A.R.R.S. vs STAR SMILEZ". 12:36.

Referencing Star's "favorite color" can be understood in this context, and surely it was by the audience in real time, as a reference to the Bloods' association with the color red. Elsewhere 40 has critiqued gang life's negative impact on children:[86]

1. Like what if Jamir like blue, your lil' bastard ass kid, what the fuck you gon do?
2. You gon make him wear red instead cuz your "crew" says to?
3. What if he wanna be a cop and not pop off tools?
4. You gon tell him "hit the block fuck the job and school"?

5. Bitch talk about my kid schemes, that shit's cool
6. I put that time in my children I'm not raisin' no fools
7. We go to movies, parks, museums for the arts
8. So my bars reflect the good parent skills you ain't got

In the first four bars, 40 called the idea of claiming legitimacy because of gang affiliation into question by posing a rhetorical question specifically to her opponent Phara. In doing so she was not only calling into question gang affiliation as an isolated reality, but also invoking it as one that is deeply enmeshed in the life for many black urbanites in the U.S. Such invocations of gang life, along with the references to drugs and other illicit activities, are also constitutive. The frequency with which they are referenced constitute them as somewhat normative realities in the daily lives of the urban black person. Thus, while street life and its accompanying image have been under more scrutiny from the battle rap community, passages like these foreground the ongoing relevance of daily life in urban black America. This is even more obvious when you watch the whole round and realize that these two bar phrases were immediately preceded by a scheme about black historical figures that I will discuss in the next section.

Iconic Figures

[86]QueenoftheRing. "40 B.A.R.R.S. vs PHARA FUNERAL". 12:59.

As I mentioned in chapter one, schemes are the most complex organizational unit within a battle rap verse. These passages of coded meaning can go on for as many as 16 bars or more. Because of their complexity and length, schemes are prime lyrical sites for battle rappers to perform blackness by way of racialized knowledge and references. The importance of lyrical expressions that reference notable black individuals lies in their normative use of people who are iconic to blackness. Taking a look back at Cee the Boss' Jay Z scheme that I previewed in the first chapter, Cee opened her first round against opponent Deisel with a 16-bar scheme in that used the rapper Jay Z and his music corpus as an ancillary theme to her main bars:[87]

1. {Yeah,} Cee a renegade **["Renegade"]** bitch, I live a hard knock life **["Hard Knock Life"]**
2. Look like you suck a glass dick [crackpipe], and live a hard rock life
3. You rock hard right? Well D my bitches pop all night
4. Have her beggin' like "can I live?" **["Can I Live"]** and get you popped on sight

5. Fuck a bounty and a bag cuz my vixens, they rock toys
6. I ain't gotta call my niggas point 'em out, we rock boys **["Roc Boys"]**
7. Act tough I'm in your face like nigga what? Nigga who? **["Nigga What? Nigga Who?"]**
8. No hook **["No Hook"]**, straight bullets comin' right for your crew

9. We from two different worlds, this is Venus vs Mars **["Venus vs Mars"]**
10. Your struggle is in your mouth cuz your story don't match your scars, I'm a god…
11. I'm a god, so you think I give a fuck, if D evil? **["D'evil"]**
12. Big beak ass bitch I really think, D single

13. Where I'm from? I'm from the heart of the city **["Heart of the City"]** where lead fly, Bedstuy
14. Put the beam on her pupil, that's red eye
15. How many Hov songs I named? But fuck it we off that
16. Me and Yeezy, we just watchin' the throne now chalk that **[*Watch the Throne* was a joint album by Jay Z and Kanye West (Yeezy)]**

[87]Queenofthering "Babs Bunny & Vague presents Queen of the Ring Cee the Boss vs Deisel." 19:08, 3:40. Brackets indicate my own clarifying information.

Demonstrating an intimate knowledge of Jay-Z's corpus exemplifies the use of a prominent black figure in an unmarked way. His name isn't even mentioned until the end of the scheme in bar 15, and even then he is referred to colloquially by his nickname, Hov. Within the bars themselves, the narrative Cee constructs against Deisel, built with many of Jay Z's song titles as well as practices of black street life and Hip Hop more broadly, normalizes blackness in a way that further contributes to its antiessentialism in the space.

This example draws together not only a racialized in-group, but also a geographical in-group, as this battle took place in New York and both Cee and Jay Z are from the same hood. Thinking back on our discussion of racialized geography, it would stand to reason why Cee may have chosen Jay Z as the artist around whom she built this scheme. By demonstrating her knowledge of his corpus while also weaving it intricately into self-affirming and opponent-denigrating bars, she tacitly aligned herself with the legitimacy of a globally known rapper from her hood.

References to black figures don't only come in the form of references to real-life individuals and their work. Battle rappers often also reference fictional characters or prominent fictional media representations of black people to serve the same purpose. 40 B.A.R.R.S. referenced both real historical figures and fictional ones in her black history scheme that she spit vs Phara Funeral:

1. I'm damn sure any bullets P clap missin' me
2. I'm proud so for the crowd, I'm bout to lead black history
3. I'm pitchin' trees but my main flow is that cocaine though
4. I'm right cuz I ride wit that white like Django

5. Bow to your roots I will move your friends' way
6. They steppin' up to fight they'll get Kunta Kinte'd
7. I'll [inaudible], that double pound carry it
8. And leave that ass movin' underground like you Harriet

9. Or drag your body back to my Hotel Rwanda
10. Surveillance tapes so the jakes don't know where to find her
11. Said she'd rock a vest if that drama spark
12. So Ima shoot right above where her armor start

13. Hit black to the white meat leakin' red and grey shit
14. It's basic that color should only matter to a racist

This time, 40 used both real and fictional black historical figures—placing them directly alongside instances of contemporary black street life—to perform her own knowledge of black history. Like Deisel's earlier bar phrase about Hurricane Katrina, 40's bars here traverse between the present moment of the battle and various moments of the past. The first two bars of the phrase rest squarely in the moment of the battle; however, she used them to set up the rest of the phrase when she said "I'm bout to lead black history."

Bars 3-12 exist simultaneously in history and the present. 40 moved smoothly and quickly through references to a number of black figures and situations that deepened the bars about contemporary street life she spit. In bars 3 and 4, 40 performed a positive association with street life by claiming that she is involved in drug distribution. Specifically, she talks about dealings with marijuana (trees), and then highlights her involvement with cocaine distribution, thus reestablishing a connection to the street by way of a more intense drug (since weed has become increasingly commonplace). "Riding wit that white" is a way of saying she's moving coke, as "white" is a street name for the drug; it is here that she introduced her first reference in Django—a fictitious slave from the film *Django Unchained* whose knowledge and skills allowed him to triumph over the oppressive white characters and an oppressive white system.

Bars 5 and 6 move on from Django to another fictitious historical figure, Kunta Kinte, from the 1976 television series *Roots.* Thinking back to Ms. Hustle's line vs 40, when she said "slavin' get whipped back to back, they shoulda let O press her," 40's line here can be read in

very much the same context. By saying Phara's friends will get Kunta Kinte'd, she used the generally understood knowledge of violence against black bodies during slavery as a way of creatively conveying a threat in what was then the present moment. Her last reference to a figure in this phrase was a to real historical figure, Harriet Tubman. She continued to speak about her own involvement in moving drugs in bar 7 when she referred to carrying a that double pound, but in bar 8 she flipped the topic to her opponent Phara. When 40 said she'll "leave that ass movin' underground," she analogized Harriet Tubman's leadership of the underground railroad and the underground nature of most graves in the United States. Each of the lines in which 40 mentioned these figures not only used their names, but also employed double meanings of realities associated with those figures. In doing this, 40 engaged the audience's knowledge of contemporary street practices while simultaneously engaging their knowledge of (real or fictional) black historical figures, thereby demonstrating her versatile knowledge of both topics. The final four bars, 11-14, bring the phrase back into the present moment, allowing 40 to move smoothly into the next part of her round.

While blackness in battle rap spaces is primary blackness from a U.S. perspective, references to black figures do not necessarily need to be black American figures. In 40's battle against Star Smilez, 40's first round contained a reggae/dancehall scheme that remains a classic to this day:[88]

61. And shit, till this rap shit pops and bring me a **pay day** [Pay Day]
62. Ima play the block on my grind like **reggae**
63. I keep a nine all black I nicknamed **Shabba**
64. When it's time to flex check my **rank** [Shabba Ranks] I'm a problem
65. **Baby** this is no **sham** [Baby Cham] before I shoot, no hablo
66. That mean I'm not talkin' 'fore I'm stoppin' your **mavado** [Mavado]
67. My connect Mexican but I **vibe**, with the **cartel** [Vybz Kartel]
68. This **lady saw** [Lady Saw] shootouts, but she ain't never shot shit

[88]Queenofthering. "40 B.A.R.R.S vs STAR SMILEZ", 6:37. Brackets in this example indicate my clarification of the artists.

69. Drama **ding dong** [Ding Dong] I'm at your door bout to pop shit
70. Big gun, long nose—**elephant man** [Elephant Man]
71. You gon get the message quick like a telegram ran
72. Get fly stay higher than **pelican** [Pelican Jamaica] can
73. But these metal cans blam you to sleep—**sandman**

The artists that 40 referenced are all highly successful black artists, part of the Afro-Caribbean musical traditions of reggae and dancehall. Most of their successes have been among black constituencies, and so the artists are almost exclusively known to black people, or at the very least people involved in the black musical world. By employing these artists' names and the social baggage that comes with them, 40 established her knowledge of this exclusive group. Her knowledge was so proficient that she was able to weave them into a larger passage about what she was going to do to her opponent, while simultaneously engaging with the audience—also primarily black—on common ground. The audience's clapped and groaned in approval after line 66 indicating a recognition of the scheme. These reactions only grew as she continued the scheme for seven more lines. This is not to say that in-group knowledge of reggae artists is a given, or that recognition of this scheme is guaranteed, however. Listeners with a familiarity with the stylistic tendencies of battle rap verses would know that line 62 is a setup for the scheme. Thus, you come to expect some creative wordplay to do with reggae afterward, even if you don't know exactly how it will be carried out. Without the knowledge of these stylistic tendencies, it would be easy to hear this line as a standalone metaphor comparing 40 "playing her block" to the daily life surrounding reggae.

Schemes like this and others are integral in performing blackness in battle rap for both battlers and fans. Over the course of chapter 4 we've explored six themes—explicit articulations of blackness, language markers, historical markers, geographical markers, street life, and iconic figures—to look at ways that battle rappers construct ideas about blackness around themselves

and their opponents onstage during a battle. Performing blackness is not only about imitating language or condemning and bolstering selected black-identified practices, but also about performing one's own *knowledge* of blackness and black spaces lyrically. Schemes foster in-group communication by allowing battlers to demonstrate their knowledge in a public forum, while also engaging the audience in play that forces them to consider how the battler's scheme fits into a larger black world. Whether addressing reggae and dancehall artists, black historical figures, Jay Z's corpus, or a set of street life practices, each scheme deals with information that is situated in nuanced ways within what is seen from the outside as the monolith that is blackness. Recognizing where these schemes lie in relation to different positions within the category of blackness helps demonstrate how their presence in battle rap verses contribute to the antiessentialist construction of blackness in battle rap spaces.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have attempted to present and analyze some of the ways in which battle rappers create and traverse a complex, antiessentialist ideascape of blackness. Battle rap participants including fans, rappers, and league administrators take disparate spaces in cities across the U.S. and, for the duration of the battle rap event, co-create transient, insular black spaces—spaces in which blackness is both quantitatively and qualitatively central. This begins in the line with fans. By openly engaging in Hip Hop fashion, the smoking of tobacco and marijuana, black-organized time, and claiming and critiquing identities that are associated with blackness—practices that are common to blackness in other spaces as well—fans establish the space as a black one and also open new possibilities for what being black can mean in the space. This carries over into the building, where these practices literally, as well as socially, separate participants from much of the outside world. It is also in the building that the primary discursive work at battle rap events occur. Driven by competition, onstage, battle rappers spit about the realities of black life and the imaginaries of black existence. Through their lyrics and their physical performances, they offer up value-based judgements about what actions and associations constitute good and bad ways to live blackness. Interestingly, these messages often conflict with one another, with a battler's voiced ideas shifting within the course of a single battle. It isn't the specific value judgements themselves that are useful in thinking about how battle rap helps to construct possibilities for blackness that reduce simple definition. It is the fact that battle rap invites this free-thinking approach to blackness in complex, antiessentialist ways that refuse to be easily captured and bounded by a definition.

My goal in this thesis was to illuminate a process of self-(re-)definition that rappers have spearheaded for decades, and to bring it into the fold of academic conversation with the hopes of adding to a bridge that scholars of Hip Hop and scholars of color more broadly have been building for years between the academy and local knowledge creators. Contemporary battle rap is a musical space in which—for the sake of competition—any facet of one's being can be put onto the table and weaponized. This has an equalizing effect, complicating many external power differentials. It also allows for a free space to discuss ideas and imagine possibilities of social categories like race and how they are lived.

This work is situated among larger conversations about local constructions of identity (including race, sexuality, gender, class, and place-based identifications) through performance. While individuals today have greater ability to amplify their voices because of the rise of social media, performance spaces continue to provide locations that intermediate between the micro and the macro, allowing performers to represent and rethink local conceptions of identity and place them in conversation with macrosocial conceptions. This thesis is also situated among conversations about blackness in the present moment. Black artists, activists, scholars, and professionals alike are—now more than ever—complicating conceptions about what blackness is and imagining what it can be. By writing this project, I hope that my work with contemporary battle rap has added to this conversation.

Future projects on battle rap should further explore the ways in which battlers and fans construct blackness. Methods from critical discourse analysis and ethnomethodology to ethnographic research and individual interviews can further enrich the discussions that center around lyrics and practices at battle rap events. Each of the themes that I presented in the final chapter offer a window into the numerous ways that this happens, and projects that elaborate on

these and other ways would bolster the argument about battle rap's complication of blackness as a category. Additionally, future projects can explore the intersections of blackness with other racial categories, as well as ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, place, and class—all of which play a prominent role in the battle rap world as well.

Battle rap has been a part of my life for the past eight years. While providing a source of entertainment, it has also allowed me—as a biracial man who grew up in predominantly white spaces—to question my assumptions about what blackness is and what blackness can be. The lyrics that battle rappers put forth onstage are rarely simple. The complex, and sometimes conflicting, ways in which battle rappers refer to blackness onstage opens space to think about blackness in ways that can exist simultaneously alongside one another, not "this" or "that" but both. Attending my first event in person in 2019 opened my eyes to the ways in which this insular black space—every present digitally—is recreated for briefly for the duration of each in-person battle rap event. Because of Covid-19, the state of in-person battle rap events is currently up in the air, but even when battle rap events go completely digital, the community in the live comment sections bring an effervescence that is at least somewhat of a proxy for in-person events. However battle rap transforms post-pandemic, I'm confident that it will still serve as a space to come together, propose, and ponder multifarious, antiessentialist imaginaries about the possibilities of blackness.

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